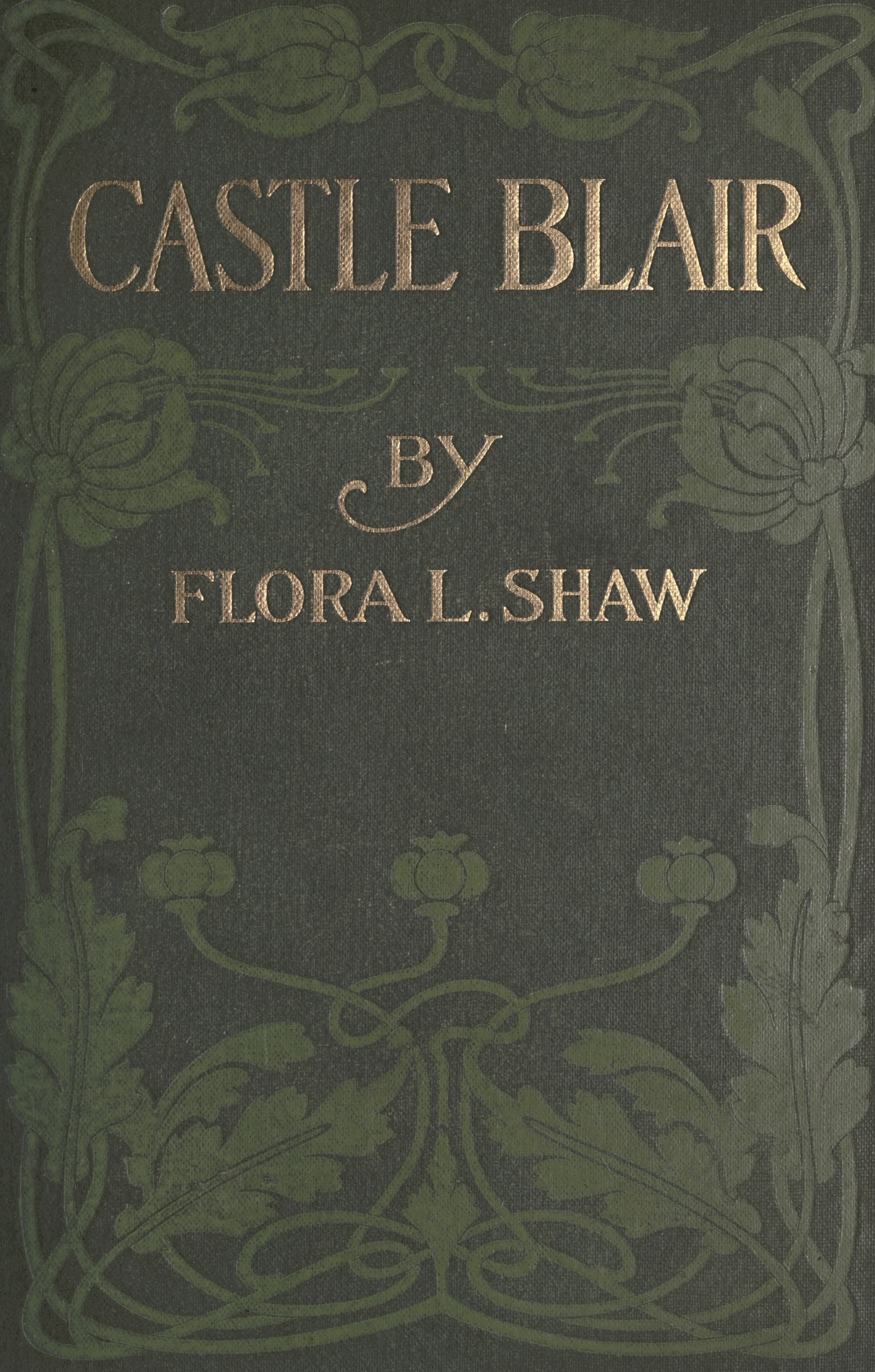

CASTLE BLAIR

BY

FLORA L. SHAW

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CASTLE BLAIR

"THERE IS A QUITE LOVELY LITTLE BOOK JUST COME OUT ABOUT CHILDREN, 'CASTLE BLAIR'! . . . THE BOOK IS GOOD, AND LOVELY, AND TRUE, HAVING THE BEST DESCRIPTION OF A NOBLE CHILD IN IT (WINNIE) THAT I EVER READ; AND NEARLY THE BEST DESCRIPTION OF THE NEXT BEST THING—A NOBLE DOG."—JOHN RUSKIN.

CASTLE BLAIR

A STORY OF YOUTHFUL DAYS.

BY

FLORA L.ouisa (SHAW,) Lugard, lady.

AUTHOR OF "HECTOR," "PHYLLIS BROWNE," AND "A SEA CHANGE."

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CASTLE BLAIR;

A STORY OF YOUTHFUL DAYS.

CHAPTER I.

IT was raining hard. Night had closed in already round Castle Blair. In the park the great trees, like giant ghosts, loomed gloomily indistinct through the dim atmosphere. Not a sound was to be heard but the steady down-pour of descending rain, and, from time to time, a long, low shudder of trees as the night wind swept over the park.

The darkness and the rain had it all their own way outside, but there was one spot of light in the landscape. The hall door of the castle stood open, and behind it, in hospitable Irish fashion, there blazed a fire from which the warm rays streamed out and illumined the very rain itself; for the dampness outside caught the pleasant glow and reflected it back again, till all round about the doorway there was, as it were, a halo of golden mist. The stone arch of the door was hidden by it, but it formed in itself an arch above the shining granite steps, — a beautiful framework of light for certain little figures, who, dark and ruddy against the glowing back-ground of the hall, were to be seen dancing backwards and forwards as though impatiently waiting for something. They were only children, and impatiently waiting for something they certainly were. There were three of them, two fair-haired girls, and a boy.

"When will she come, I wonder?" said the elder of the girls, looking anxiously through the darkness in the direction of the avenue. "I 'm sure the train must have been ever so late."

"Of course it was!" replied the boy; "it always is, and besides it would take half the day to get from Ballyboden in this weather. We ought to have sent a sailing vessel for her instead of the carriage.'

"I say, Murtagh, I wonder what she *will* be like. Uncle Blair 's never seen her. Donnie doesn't know anything about her. It 's very funny having French cousins one doesn't know anything about."

"Oh, she 's sure to be all right; Uncle Harry was papa's favorite brother! But I wish Bobbo and Winnie had got in in time. Hark! what 's that?"

"That" was the sound of carriage wheels, the sound the little listeners expected. It drew nearer and nearer, approaching slowly along the winding avenue; the wet gravel crunched under the wheels, and at last out of the darkness emerged a heavy old carriage drawn by a pair of heavy old horses.

"I say, David, look sharp!" called Murtagh from the doorway. The horses were startled into activity by an unexpected touch of the whip, and the next instant the carriage stopped at the bottom of the steps.

The boy who had spoken dashed down to open the door, but a sudden shyness seemed to fall upon his two companions, and they shrank back into the hall. There was, however, little to be afraid of in the girl who in another moment stood upon the threshold. She seemed to be about eighteen or nineteen. Tired and travel-stained though she looked, there was a quiet grace in the slight figure; and the face in its setting of ruffled gold hair was as soft as it was sparkling. Her most remarkable feature was a pair of large, dark gray eyes which were looking out just now with a half-interested, half-wistful expression, that seemed to say this was no common arriving.

And indeed for her it was not. An absolute stranger, she was arriving for the first time at Castle Blair, to make a new home in a new country amongst relations she did not know. She had been told she was to live with an old bachelor uncle, and that was literally all the information she possessed. If the children, as their words had indicated, knew little about her, she knew still less of them, for she was not even aware of their existence.

Notwithstanding the first movement of hesitation the elder little girl seemed quite to understand that upon her devolved the duties of hostess, for she came forward now, and holding out her hand said shyly, "How do you do?"

The new comer felt shy too perhaps, but she took the hand and kept it in hers, drawing the child nearer to her as she answered in a sweet, clear voice: "I am very well, thank you, only a little tired with traveling. A long journey is very tiring."

"Yes, very," said the little girl, blushing again; and there the conversation would have been likely to stop, but the boy who had opened the carriage door, having taken the stranger's wraps from her, had now followed her into the hall and exclaimed heartily:

"Awfully tiring, and that drive from Ballyboden is so long. You must be very cold; come over to the fire."

As he spoke he dropped her rug and bag on the floor, and ran and pulled forward one of the wooden arm-chairs that were ranged along the wall on either side of the fire-place. "Did you see the fire as you came up?" he added; "the door had got shut somehow, but we opened it on purpose."

"Yes, I saw it just now," she replied, as after a minute's hesitation she seated herself in the chair. "It looked so pleasant and cheerful through the rain, it made me wish to get to it."

"A fire 's rather a jolly thing to see after a long drive in the dark," said the boy; "and we do know how to make fires here if we don't know anything else."

The children evidently expected their guest to stay in the hall, so she unfastened her gloves, and drawing them off held out two white hands to the blaze in quiet enjoyment of the warmth. Then after a pause, during which the children were studying her appearance, and she was wondering who her little companions might be, she turned again to the boy and said :

"We have not any one to introduce us to each other so we must introduce ourselves ; I daresay you know my name is Adrienne. Will you tell me your name, and the names of your sisters ?"

The two girls blushed again, the little one shrinking behind the elder, but the boy replied at once :

"I 'm Murtagh. That tallest one is Rosamond Mary; Rosie we call her. She 's twelve years old."

"No, Murtagh, you always make mistakes ; I 'm thirteen very nearly !" exclaimed Rosie, suddenly forgetting her shyness.

"Oh well ! it 's all the same. Of course, girls always like to be thought old," he explained, with a funny little chuckle, to Adrienne. "Besides, you won't be thirteen till the winter."

"And that little thing is Eleanor Grace," he continued, addressing himself to his duty as master of the ceremonies ; "Ellie, she 's called. She 's only three. Winnie 's the best of them ; she 's worth two of Rosie ; but she and Bobbo are out in the garden."

"Out ! In this pouring rain ?" said Adrienne, looking towards the open door.

"What does that matter ?" returned Murtagh. "We don't mind rain. We 're hardy little barbarians ; you needn't expect to find us like dandy French children."

The boy spoke flippantly ; he was evidently in a state of excited high spirits.

A merry twinkle woke in Adrienne's eyes. Already she was forgetting the fear of strange bachelor uncles.

"No," she replied, with a significant glance at the dishevelled state of the children's toilettes. "I did not think you were dandy."

Murtagh blushed in spite of himself, and looked deprecatingly at the knees of his somewhat worn nickerbockers, while his sister hastened to excuse herself.

"It really is impossible to keep tidy with the boys," she explained; "they do pull one about so."

"Come now, the boys didn't tear that dress; you tore it yourself on Tuesday, coming down a nut tree," said Murtagh.

A contemptuous reply from Rosie seemed likely to lead to a sharp answer, but Adrienne interposed a question. She felt quite at home with the children now, and she wanted to find out something about them.

"Do you always live here?" she asked.

"Of course we do!" answered both the children at once. "There's nowhere else where we could live since we came back from India."

"Are there any more of you besides Winnie and Bobbo?"

"No," said Murtagh, "that's all. And quite enough, I expect you'll think before long," he added, looking thoughtfully into the fire, and suddenly ceasing from his former flippant manner.

Still Adrienne looked as though she would like to know more, and after hesitating for a moment she continued: "Who else is there in the house? Who takes care of you?"

"Oh!" said Rosie, "there's Mrs. Donegan. She takes care of everything you know, and cooks the dinner and all that. Then there's Peggy Murphy. She does the schoolroom, and mends our clothes; and there is Kate Murphy; and then there's the new housemaid, and Uncle Blair's man, Brown; and that's all except Mr. Plunkett."

"Mr. Plunkett!" repeated Murtagh in a tone of disgust.

"Oh he is so horrible," continued Rosie, who seemed prepared for any amount of chatter now she had thrown away her shyness. "He settles all about everything, and gives us our pocket-money on Saturdays, and gives Mrs. Donegan money to buy our clothes, and orders everybody about, and interferes. Mrs. Plunkett says his mother was a second cousin of Uncle Blair's mother, but I don't believe she was. He 's quite vulgar; he doesn't have late dinner or anything. But he doesn't live in this house, you know; he lives in a house in the park."

"He 's dot such a nice ickle baby," put in Ellie, who had come close to Adrienne, and had been following the conversation with wide-open eyes and ears.

"Has he?" said Adrienne, encircling the child with her arm. "What is it like?"

"It's dot two dreat big eyes and—"

"It 's got a nose, Ellie, don't forget that," interrupted Murtagh mockingly.

Little Ellie was silenced; she flushed up, and tears came into her eyes. But without paying any attention to her Rosie continued:

"And that's all the people there are in the house."

"Except—Monsieur Blair," suggested Adrienne, comforting Ellie as she spoke by hanging her watch round the child's neck.

"Oh! Uncle Blair! Yes, of course he's here, only I forgot all about him."

"You don't see much of him?"

"No," said Murtagh, with a chuckle; "he thinks we 're perfect little savages. He has breakfast with us every morning, because, you know, he thinks he ought to; but you should see how funny he looks. I believe he 's always expecting us to set upon him and eat him, or do something of that kind."

"Hullo, Mrs. Donegan!" he called out suddenly, recovering his excited spirits as a good-humored, shrewd-looking woman entered the hall. "There you are! and it 's high time you came, too. Here 's a poor lady sitting freezing in the hall just for want of some one to show her to her room. Allow me to introduce Mrs. Bridget Donegan Esquire of Tipperary."

Adrienne acknowledged the introduction with a smile, and Mrs. Donegan, curtseying, began at once to apologise for not having met her at the door.

"It 's very sorry I am, Ma'am, that you should have been kept sitting out here. I've been waiting this last half-hour to hear the bell go," she began with much respectful dignity. And then suddenly turning round upon the children: "It's you, Master Murtagh, might ha' thought to ring it; and where's your manners, Miss Rose, to keep Miss Blair sitting out here in the cold instead of taking her into the drawing-room."

"It's not very cold," said Adrienne, with a smiling glance at the fire. But she rose as she spoke, and Mrs. Donegan continued: "Mr. Blair desired his compliments, Ma'am, and he was sorry he was engaged to dine out the evening you arrived, but he hoped the young ladies and gentlemen would make you comfortable. And, if you please, Ma'am, I've boiled a couple of fowls for you, and there's a nice little drop o' soup; and will you have dinner served in the dining-room, or wouldn't it be more comfortable like, if I sent it up with the children's tea into the school-room."

"Oh, I should like that much the best, please," said Adrienne. And the expression of relief that lighted up her countenance was perhaps hardly complimentary to Mr. Blair.

"Then it's no use going to that smelly old drawing-room!" exclaimed Murtagh. "Come along to the school-room!"

He turned round as he spoke, and led the way across the hall, treating with silent contempt the expostulations of Rose and Mrs. Donegan, who were evidently of opinion that Adrienne ought first to be conducted to the drawing-room. He told Ellie to run on and open the door, so that there might be some light in the passage; but her little fingers not proving strong enough to turn the handle, the whole party had to grope their way in the dark. At the end of a long passage Rosie threw open a door, saying, "Here's the school-room! It's not particularly tidy. We did make it neat this morning, but somehow it always gets wrong again."

If it had been made neat that morning, it certainly had got considerably wrong again. It was a good-sized room, with a large window at one end and another smaller one at the side. But the curtains were not drawn before either of them, and one was open, letting the rain beat in upon the carpet. The fire had burnt low, and the fender was full of ashes and chestnut-husks. The rest of the room was so strewn with toys, books, cooking-utensils, and miscellaneous rubbish of every description, that there was some difficulty in distinguishing any article of furniture: only the tea-table, clean and white in the midst, stood out against the general disorder like an ark in a second deluge.

"Deed faith, it 's time ye had some one to see after yez," muttered Mrs. Donegan to herself. "Where 's Miss Winnie and Master Bobbo?" she added aloud.

"Gone to the garden to get some apples," answered Murtagh. "I wish they 'd look sharp in."

"Well, when they do come in there isn't a dress for Miss Winnie to put on. All the print dresses are gone to the wash-tub, and she soaked her old black one through and through this morning."

"Oh well, she can dry herself all right. Don't you bother her about it and she won't bother you," replied Murtagh, good-humoredly, sitting down to the piano as he spoke, and beginning to play "St. Patrick's Day in the Morning."

"That 's just the way it is with them all; there 's no getting them to listen to reason; an' it isn't that they don't have frocks enough," explained poor Mrs. Donegan in despair, "but you might just every bit as well try to keep clean pinafores on the ducks and chickens out in the yard as try to keep them tidy."

Murtagh's only answer was to crow like a cock, and then he fell into the more meditative quacking of ducks as he began an elaborate variation upon his air.

Their guest began to look just a little forlorn. She might have been amused at first, and perhaps relieved too by the children's want of ceremony, but after traveling for three or four days people are apt to be tired, and it did not seem to occur to any one that she might like to be shown to a room where she could rest a little and wash away the dust of her long journey. There was apparently no chair disengaged either, upon which she might sit down, so she stood leaning against the chimney-piece, while Rosie tried hurriedly to make the room a little tidier, and Ellie sat down upon the floor, delighted with the treasure that had been left hanging round her neck.

But Rosie had some idea of the duties of a hostess, and she soon noticed how white the girl looked.

"You look dreadfully tired," she said in a voice so gentle that Adrienne was quite surprised. "Wait a minute, here 's a comfortable chair; I 'll clear the music out of it." As she spoke she tipped up an arm-chair, so as to empty what was in it on the floor, and wheeled it to the fire-place.

"Thank you," said Adrienne; "but if you would show me where my room is: I should like to take off these," indicating with a little gesture her bonnet and cloak; "I am so tired." She meant to smile, but she really was so tired that she was much more near having tears in her eyes.

"Oh, yes," said Rosie; "and I 'll get you some —" but the end of her sentence was lost as she ran out of the room.

The variation of "St. Patrick's Day" was growing so intricate that Murtagh was completely absorbed by it. Mrs. Donegan was engaged in picking up books and toys from the floor; there was nothing for Adrienne to do but to sit down and wait.

"You do look tired, Ma'am," said Mrs. Donegan presently, pausing with a broken Noah's ark in her hand. "I think, Master Murtagh, I 'll go and send the tea in at once. There 's no use waitin' for Miss Winnie and Master Bobbo."

"Fire away," grunted Murtagh from the piano, executing some difficult chords with his left hand. His music was very good, quite unlike the playing of most children, and Adrienne began to think it pleasant to listen to as she lay back in the big chair Rosie had prepared for her.

But in another moment the music was interrupted by a rushing sound, a collision of some kind, and then a confusion of voices in the hall.

"Whatever are you thinking of, Master Bobbo?" came out clearly in Donnie's energetic tones.

"I do wish you 'd look where you 're going, Donnie; you 've nearly knocked me into the middle of next week!" retorted a hearty boy's voice.

"Hurrah! here they are," cried Murtagh, and forgetting the interest of his music he started up and dashed into the hall. There was some whispering outside the door; Adrienne heard plainly, "What 's she like?" and then Bobbo and Murtagh entered the room, followed by Winnie.

Bobbo was a pleasant strong-looking boy, with clear eyes, rosy cheeks, and a turned-up nose, a contrast to Murtagh's sallow face and dark deep-set eyes.

Winnie was a little elf-like thing, and as she came in at the door, her scarlet cloak twisted all crooked with the wind, the skirt of her brown dress gathered up in both hands to hold the apples they had been to fetch, her hair beaten down over her forehead by the rain, her great dark eyes dancing, her cheeks glowing, the merry mouth ready to break into smiles, she seemed the very incarnation of life and brightness.

"The Queen of robin redbreasts!" was the idea that flashed through Adrienne's mind, and she sat up with revived animation to greet the new comers.

Bobbo walked up to her and said, "How do you do?" with a decidedly Irish intonation, retiring then behind her chair and entering into a whispered conversation with little Ellie.

Winnie advanced to the hearth-rug and dropped all her apples upon it, saying as she did so: "Fetch the dishes, Bobbo, from the pantry." Then she shook hands with Adrienne, looking at her with clear, intelligent eyes.

"You have got your apples," said Adrienne. "Your brother told me you were gone for them. He said you did not mind being wet."

"Mind being wet!" said Winnie, with a bright look of amusement; "of course we don't. Are you fond of apples?" she continued, looking down at the rosy fruit and wet leaves scattered on the hearth-rug. "We thought we'd have some for tea as you were coming, so Bobbo and I went to fetch them. We meant to have been in by the time you came, only it was so dark it made us longer. See, here's a beauty!" she added, kneeling down upon the rug and picking out a specially fine Ribstone Pippin. "Do try this; I'm sure it's good."

She held it up towards Adrienne as she spoke, large and rich-colored, still wet with rain, the cluster of leaves under which it had ripened yet crisp upon its stalk, and she looked so thoroughly persuaded of its deliciousness that Adrienne could not help taking it, and answered smilingly—

"I will have it for dessert after the chickens."

But with a sudden change of expression, forgetting all about Adrienne, Winnie turned to Murtagh, and exclaimed eagerly—

"Oh, it has been such fun getting these; wasn't it, Bobbo? I *must* tell you all about it. Well, we got past Bland's cottage all safe enough; the rain and the wind were making such a jolly row there wasn't a chance of our being heard."

"Bland's the gardener," explained Murtagh to Adrienne, "and he always tries to catch us when we bag the fruit."

"But just as we were nearly in the garden," continued Winnie,—"Bobbo was on the top of the gate, and I'd got up as far as the lock,—what should we hear but Bland coming, tramp, tramp, along the gravel; and Bobbo was such an awful little muff, he called out: 'I say, he's got a lantern, an' he's sure to see us.' And, of course, don't you see that made him hear us, and it would be all up if we couldn't get hid quick enough; so I jumped down and squeezed in under a bush, but when Bobbo tried to get down, one of the spikes of the gate went through his knickerbockers, and there he stuck. On came Bland, and called out: 'Ha! ye good-for-nothing vagabones; it 's caught ye are this time!' and, lo and behold! it wasn't Bland at all, but a great big policeman. He pulled Bobbo down off the gate, and didn't he tear a fine hole in the back of his knickerbockers, just? Poor Bobbo got in such a fright he couldn't say a word, so I jumped out from under the bush, and I said: 'We 're not stealing! we 're only going to take some apples for tea. We 're ladies and gentlemen.' So he looked at the hole in Bobbo's clothes as if he wasn't quite sure, so I said: 'You tore that, taking him off the gate!' Bobbo did look awfully untidy though, with the light of the lantern shining full on the raggy part of him. Then he turned the lantern on to my face, and then he laughed, and said: 'I 'm sure I beg your pardon, Miss; I hadn't an idea it would be any one but ragamuffins out o' the village about this wild night.'

"So I said, very politely, you know: 'Please *would* you just help us over the gate? It 's so very high to climb when the bars are slippery with rain.' So he helped us both over, and then I said: 'Would you mind just standing about here till we come back? And if you hear Bland coming give a good loud whistle, will you?' So he said he would, and we ran off and got the apples, and then he helped us back over the gate again, and we gave him some apples, and here we are. By the by, Bobbo, I 've left my hat up in that first apple tree. But wasn't it jolly fun making the policeman keep watch for us?"

"Awfully jolly!" said Murtagh. "What 's his number? we'll make him do it to-morrow night, too. No, no, Winnie; that 's not the way to settle those apples. Put the streaked one next the rosy one. So. Now put a yellow one, and a Virginian creeper leaf. There; that 's it! You 've no more eye for color than a steam-engine."

Tired though she was, Adrienne's face had glistened with responsive fun as Winnie, with expressive gestures, described their little adventure. She had not the least idea who these children were, but they were merry and charming, and their manners put her at her ease.

Just as Winnie stopped speaking the schoolroom door was pushed slowly open, and Rosie entered, carefully holding in both hands a salver upon which was a glass of wine. "You look so tired," she said to Adrienne, "that I thought you 'd better have this without waiting for tea."

"Thank you," said Adrienne. The wine was just what she needed, and as she put the glass back upon the salver she added gratefully: "You are accustomed to be mistress of a house I see."

Rosie flushed with pleasure, and replied: "There 's nobody but me except when Cousin Jane 's here. I'll go and see now about hurrying tea: I can't think what they 're taking such a time for."

"But my room," suggested Adrienne again; "if I might go to it first, I am so dusty."

"Oh yes!" said Rosie, "I 'll be back in a minute;" and she departed on her errand to the kitchen.

"I 'll show you your room if you like," said Winnie, jumping up from the floor. "Come along!"

But the fire was drawing clouds of steam from the child's wet clothes, and as Adrienne looked towards her she perceived it.

"Do you know," she exclaimed in dismay, "your dress must be quite wet through? Please do not mind about my room, but go and change it quickly."

"Oh, it doesn't hurt me being wet," laughed Winnie.

"Besides," said Murtagh, "she hasn't got anything to change into. Didn't you hear Donnie say all her clothes were in the wash-tub?"

Adrienne hesitated. She did not like to insist. At the same time she had already made such friends with these children that she felt as though it were somehow her business to prevent them catching cold.

"Haven't you a dressing-gown?" she asked at length. "I think it must be very bad to stay so wet as that."

"Oh yes!" said Winnie, "I'll go and undress and put on my dressing-gown, then I'll be ready to jump into bed without any more trouble; that'll be rather fun. Do you know where my dressing-gown is, Murtagh?" she added, as she danced off towards the door. "You had it last, the day we were dressing up, don't you remember?

"I'm sure I don't know where we left it," replied Murtagh, pausing to contemplate the dishes with his head on one side and an apple in each hand. "It's somewhere about, I suppose."

"Oh. well, never mind. I'll get Rosie's. Don't finish settling those apples till I come down;" and she vanished into the passage.

Murtagh dropped the apples which he held, and jumped up.

"Shall I show you your room?" he asked, taking a candle from the chimney-piece and turning with sudden politeness to Adrienne. "You really must want to get your things off. Let me carry your umbrella. And you would like to have your bag. We left it in the hall, I think."

He led the way, as he spoke, out again into the hall, and crossing over to the other end began to mount a broad oak staircase.

It was dark with age, and the light of the candle which Murtagh carried sufficed to show that in places bits of carving had dropped or been broken from the high wainscot and massive balustrade; doors were let into the wainscoting, and two of them stood open, but they only disclosed dark distances that seemed to tell of long passages or descending flights of steps.

Murtagh was quite silent at first, preceding Adrienne by a few steps, but when they reached the corridor above he fell back so as to walk beside her.

She said something about the house being very large.

'Yes, and it seems beastly lonely to you now; doesn't it?" he said in a tone different from any he had used before. "I did feel so nasty at first when we came from India. But you must cheer up, you know; you won't think us so bad, I expect, when you get accustomed to us, and it 's a dear old place. There 's a beautiful river full of rocks, and real wild mountains with heather on them."

"I 'm sure I shall like everything," she replied warmly.

"Well, you know," said Murtagh, thoughtfully, "we 're awfully rampageous and everything. That 's why people don't like us. You see we can't help it exactly, we 're always that way." There was a half-sad undertone in the boy's voice, and his companion turned her sweet eyes kindly upon him as she answered, "You 've been very kind to me."

He looked gratified, but he put an end to the conversation by throwing open a door and exclaiming, "This is your room."

It was a large, comfortable room with old-fashioned, faded furniture, and a great four-post bed; the big fire that blazed cheerily at one end filling it all with warm light and dancing shadows.

"Have you got water, and all that kind of thing?" he inquired with a look round the room.

"Yes, thank you. Will you unfasten that little box for me?"

Murtagh, having unfastened the box and poked the fire, retired, saying that he would come and fetch her as soon as tea was ready; and the girl was left alone to realize that her new life had actually begun.

She was an orphan. Her mother had been French, her father was the Uncle Harry of whom the children spoke. But both had died while she was yet a baby, and her father had particularly desired that after being brought up by her mother's relations in France she should, as soon as she was old enough, go to live with his brother John.

From her babyhood she had known that she was to come to Ireland when she was eighteen. Though she had never seen her Uncle John, nor even heard from him directly, his arrangements for her had been always so kindly and generous that she had been taught to think of him with both affection and respect. With her French blood she had inherited, too, French adaptability. No one could like having to come to live with strangers, but it was not so bad as having to do as many of her companions had done — marry a perfect stranger; it had to be borne, and she was fully prepared to make the best of it. She was quite ready to be interested in the place and its inhabitants. This rambling house with its dark corridors, its old staircase and endless doors, telling of unoccupied rooms, was unlike anything she had ever seen in France; the idea of living in it pleased her. Irish ways certainly seemed different from any that she knew; but she had expected that they would be different, and the children had received her with such quaint familiarity that already, to an extent she could hardly have believed possible, she felt at home.

CHAPTER II.

AT eight o'clock next morning, as a great bell ringing through the house announced that breakfast was ready, Murtagh and Rosie set off together from the school-room to fetch their guest, both of them anxious for the glory of introducing her to their uncle.

By the time they got up-stairs Adrienne had already left her room, and was standing in the strip of sunlight that streamed through her open door, looking doubtfully down the corridor. She wore a rough gray woollen dress, fastened at the throat with a knot of bright blue ribbon, and in her belt she had put two or three red leaves from the Virginian creeper that clustered round her window. The sunlight, shining full upon her golden hair, made of the whole a picture that was extremely satisfactory to Murtagh's eye.

"I say, Rosie!" he exclaimed, standing still in the dark end of the corridor, "doesn't she look jolly like that."

"Yes, isn't she pretty? I expect she's had all her clothes made in Paris too," Rosie replied in an enthusiastic whisper, which betrayed that however much the young lady's education had been neglected in other respects, there were some things she did reverence.

"Paris!" retorted Murtagh, contemptuously. But at that moment Adrienne perceived them, and came forward with a bright "Good morning."

"I guessed that the bell meant breakfast," she continued, "and I was wondering how I should find my way to the dining-room."

"That's why we came," said Rosie; "and then there's Uncle Blair, you know, you haven't seen him yet."

"No," said Adrienne. "And the others?" she continued after a little pause, "where are they? Are they in the dining-room?"

"Oh, Bobbo's in bed, I think," replied Rosie, "but he'll be down in a minute or two; and Winnie's — out," she added, letting her voice drop mysteriously at the last word.

"Then she did go?" asked Murtagh eagerly.

"Yes, quite early, while it was dark, about three o'clock, I think; the stable clock struck, but I was so sleepy I couldn't count."

"Is it a secret?" asked Adrienne.

"Well, it's not exactly — at least it's a sort of a secret," replied Rose, doubtfully. She looked at Murtagh as she spoke, to see what he thought; but he was looking at Adrienne, and she had to decide for herself.

"I think you might know," she continued. "She's gone to the Liss of Voura to see if she can see the — Fairies." The last word came out with a vivid blush.

"They say they dance there every morning when the sun rises. But I daresay it 's not true," she added in a would-be careless tone, her skepticism arising not from any doubt in the fairies' existence, but from a sudden fear that Adrienne might think such idea ridiculous.

"Why shouldn't it be true I should like to know?" asked Murtagh, with a somewhat fierce ring of championship in his tone. But they had reached the dining room, and Rosie gladly avoided the necessity for answering by throwing open the door and ushering Adrienne into the presence of Mr. Blair.

He had been sitting reading the newspaper, but as they entered he rose and stretched out both hands to Adrienne, saying in a warm gentle voice: "My dear child, you are very welcome."

As Adrienne advanced, blushing a little, to lay her hands in his, he gazed at her with something of surprised tenderness in his face, and murmured, "Rénée!" Then he added aloud: "What is your name, my dear?"

"Adrienne," she answered.

"Ah, yes, yes. That was her name too," he said dreamily to himself. Then drawing out a chair from the table he continued: "Sit down, and make the tea; I shan't have to do it for myself, any more now."

She sat down as she was told, and began to busy herself with the tea-making. Her uncle stood beside her some little time in silence watching her movements.

"Why didn't they tell me you were so like your mother?" he asked presently.

"My mother!" exclaimed Adrienne. "Am I like her? She died so long ago I don't remember her at all," she added sadly.

"Yes, yes; only two years after she married him. It 's a long time ago now. How old are you, my dear?"

"I was eighteen my last birthday," replied Adrienne; but her uncle did not seem to hear. He walked away to his place at the bottom of the table, and his next remark was to ask Rosie where the other children were. Rosie answered sedately that she thought they were coming presently, all except Winnie; and breakfast proceeded in silence till Bobbo came tumbling into the room with little Ellie following upon his heels.

He did not speak to any one, and would have taken his place at once at the breakfast table; but as Adrienne naturally held out her hand and said "Good morning," he came around and shook hands with her, asking with a hearty look out of his frank blue eyes, whether she had got rested yet. Then, though the children kept up a half-whispered conversation between themselves at their end of the table, they did not speak either to their uncle or to Adrienne. Mr. Blair maintained complete silence, and Adrienne devoted herself to Ellie, whose high chair was placed beside her.

The little thing was too shy to speak much, but she looked her surprise and delight at the nicely cut fingers of bread and butter which Adrienne built up into castles on her blue plate, and watched with almost solemn interest the important, and, to her, altogether novel operation of sifting sugary snow upon the roofs of them. Then, as she grew bolder, a little rosy finger was put out, and when some of the snow fell upon it there came such a merry peal of baby laughter that Adrienne laughed too, and Mr. Blair looked up in benign astonishment.

The other children regarded with some surprise the consideration with which the wants of their small sister were supplied, but their chief attention was devoted to their breakfast.

They ate continuously till their hunger was appeased; then Murtaugh pushed out his chair, and they all went away, not having been more than a quarter of an hour in the room.

Mr. Blair had finished his breakfast, and apparently was absorbed again in the reading of his newspaper so Adrienne quietly prepared to follow the children. But as she moved across the room her uncle looked up.

"You have had a sorry welcome, I am afraid, my dear," he said; "but I hope you will be able soon to feel that, for all that, we are none the less glad to have you amongst us." He rose, as he spoke, and walked slowly towards the fire-place where Adrienne stood. "You understand, of course," he continued, "that so long as you live with me you are mistress here. Donegan is very anxious to make you comfortable, but I daresay she may not know everything you require. So you must just make yourself as much at home as you can from the very first, and order anything you want. May I trust you to do this?"

"You are very kind," Adrienne replied gratefully. Then as she looked up at the kind, dreamy face that was turned towards her she was encouraged to add: "But I had a very kind welcome; the children were watching for me, and they took charge of me."

"Ah yes, the children," replied her uncle. "You must try and put up with them as well as you can. Mr. Plunkett tells me that they are very unruly; but they are the children of my brother Launcelot, and till he sends for them they will remain here. Who knows," he added in the tone of one struck by a sudden idea; "perhaps you will not mind having them: they may serve as a sort of companion for you, my poor child. I am afraid you will be very lonely here."

"Do you mean," said Adrienne, puzzled, "you thought I would not like to have the children? Oh, but I am so glad!" And there was no questioning the sudden lighting up of her face. "I was so afraid," she continued; then a vivid blush interrupted the new sentence, and she ended in some confusion—"I love children very much."

"They are very lucky," said her uncle, with a glance of admiration at the pretty confused figure that stood before him on the hearthrug.

"I did not mean,"—she began, responding half-laughingly to the amused look in his face, and at the same time coloring more deeply as she saw that he had divined the end of her sentence.

"My dear child," he interrupted, "you did not mean anything but what was perfectly natural,—that you dreaded the dullness of living alone with a worn-out old man. And I am right glad to find that the children are likely to be a pleasure to you instead of a worry; indeed, I wonder I did not think of that before, for there is only just enough difference of age between you," he added, smiling, "to make *you* delightful to me; while the others!—" An expression of comic despair finished the sentence.

"But now," he continued, "you will be a Godsend to all of us. Since you care about children you will look after them a little for me. And as for them; well, even I will credit them with good taste enough to appreciate in some measure at least the privilege of having such a little guardian. And now, my dear, I will not keep you any longer."

He bent forward, as he spoke, and touched her forehead with his lips. Then with a kindly pressure of the hand he walked to the door, and held it open while she passed out. His rooms lay in the opposite direction to those occupied by the children, so outside the dining-room he turned away; and Adrienne, after crossing the hall and wandering about a little among smaller passages, was guided by the sound of voices to a door which she recognized at once, thanks to a crooked brass handle and the letters "L. B." cut with a penknife in the brown wood above the lock.

She opened it, and found herself straightway in the presence of all the children. The large window at the end of the room was open wide, and Winnie seated side ways on the window-sill, with her head resting against the gray stone frame-work, was eating a large hunch of bread. A flock of pigeons and white ducks clamored for scraps on the terrace outside; curled up in her lap lay four small kittens, and the big mother cat sat sunning herself upon the window-sill; but Winnie seemed to be paying only a mechanical attention to her pets. She was white from want of food, and there was a general air of pre-occupation and disappointment in her attitude,—disappointment which seemed to have com municated itself in a measure to the other children, who stood grouped around her.

"No," she was saying as Adrienne entered; "it 's just Peggy's rubbish, and there 's an end of it."

"Well, but," said Murtagh doubtfully, "they might be there another day and not be there to-day."

"No," returned Winnie decidedly; "I don't believe they 're ever there. It was quite dark when I got up on the Liss, and I hid under a bush and watched with my eyes wide open till it was blazing light all over everywhere, and I didn't see a single thing, and there — there 's an end of it. It 's just rubbish!" She flung a piece of crust out on the grass as she spoke, so that the poor ill-used ducks had to turn round and waddle quite a journey before they got it. But perhaps even ducks can look reproachful, for she broke almost immediately another bit from her hunch of bread, and threw it to a fat laggard, with a compassionate — "There, poor old Senior, that 's for you." And then, turning more gently to Murtagh, she said: "Never mind, Myrrh, you know it wasn't any use believing it if it wasn't true."

Murtagh did not answer. But suddenly an idea crossed Bobbo's mind, and he exclaimed, half-doubtfully: "Win, do you think — they might have known you were coming, and perhaps they didn't choose for you to see them?"

The notion seemed to find some favor with the other children. Winnie glanced at Murtagh to see what he thought; but Murtagh, who had been aware of Adrienne's entrance, was looking to her, so Winnie's eyes followed his.

"No, I do not think that exactly," said Adrienne slowly, finding that she was expected to speak. She seated herself on the window-sill, opposite Winnie, and began to stroke the old cat. Then she continued in the same slow, thoughtful tone: "Once I used to believe in fairies as you do, and I used to want to see them, but I never did. I used to think I did sometimes, but I never did. Then I began to think they could not be true, and that made me very unhappy, for I loved them so. I don't think you can love them as much as I did. Everything that happened to me I used to think the fairies were there ; you see, I wasn't like you ; I was all alone, and hadn't anybody but the fairies. When it was fine I thought the fairies were in the sun ; when it rained I thought they were in the rain. I thought they were in the flowers, in the moon, — everywhere, in everything. But still I began to be afraid they could not be true.

" I do not know how long that lasted, but I remember quite, quite well the day when it was all finished — the very last day when I ever believed in them.

" It was when I was eight years old. It was one wet winter afternoon. I had been alone nearly all day, and I had been standing a long time by the window watching the rain beat down upon the pavement. It was growing dark, but still I did not go away; for I always used to think the little splashes were water-fairies dancing, and I liked to watch them. I was thinking about them, and half-dreaming, I think, when suddenly, quite suddenly, I seemed to know that they were not fairies at all — nothing but water-splashes. I felt almost frightened, and I went away from the window and sat down on the hearthrug in front of the fire. But then the sight of the fire reminded me that there were no fire-fairies either; no fairies anywhere all over the world. It seemed such a dreadful thing to know ; and I couldn't help it, — I just hid my face in the hearthrug, and cried like a little baby."

The children had fixed their eyes with interest and sympathy on Adrienne, but her attention was apparently concentrated on stroking old Griffin, who purred in the sunshine.

" I never shall forget that afternoon," she continued, " I was so very unhappy ; and it wasn't only that afternoon ; for months afterwards I couldn't bear to think of a fairy. But the reason I tell you about it," she added, raising her eyes and looking towards the children, "is because afterwards it went away. One of my uncles came to live with us, and he told me about the true fairies; I mean the angels; and I have believed them ever since. And so you need not be disappointed because the fairies do not really dance where Winnie went to look, because the angels are better, and they are true. Some people don't think the angels are all round us everywhere as the fairies were, but I do. I think it is so beautiful to believe that they are everywhere, in everything; sent down from heaven to make the flowers sweet, and the fruit ripe, and to put good into us."

She looked out, as she finished speaking, to the sunny park, where the great trees stood in all their autumn glory. The children looked out too and were silent. Just for the moment they were all feeling, as it were, the presence of angels.

But suddenly Bobbo was struck by another idea. "Why you 're talking English!" he exclaimed. "But you know you 're French! I 'd forgotten all about it!" He seemed quite excited by his discovery, and Adrienne began to laugh.

"Oh yes!" cried Winnie, "of course you are, and Murtagh and I had got some things ready to say. Hadn't we, Murtagh? 'Comment vous portez vous, and 'Parlez vous Anglais.'"

"I am very well, thank you," said Adrienne, with a little mock bow. "And I speak English just as easily as I do French. We lived for years in England, you know, and then I always had English governesses. Grand'mère knew, of course, that I was coming here, so she paid particular attention to my English."

"Oh!" said all the children in chorus; and then Rosie, coloring violently, asked a question which it had evidently been agreed beforehand that she should ask.

"What did you say your name was? Murtagh says it 's *Adrenne*; but *that* isn't a name exactly at all, is it?"

"Yes," said Adrienne, smiling. "He is quite right; Adrienne Marie Véronique Erstein Blair!"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Bobbo, doubling himself up as though the very sound gave him a pain. "What a name to go to bed with! Do you expect us to say all that every time we want the door shut?"

The faces of the other children were so full of genuine dismay that Adrienne laughed outright.

"Grand'mere used to call me Reine," she said, "that's a little shorter, isn't it?"

"Yes, but," said Murtagh doubtfully, "'Rain!' It's not pretty, or anything. You're not a bit rainy-looking."

"Pitter, patter! Drip, drop, dropsy!" exclaimed Bobbo, his blue eyes lighting up impudently.

"Hush, Bobbo, be quiet; you're behaving very rudely,' said Rosie, with a little anxious glance at Adrienne. "We can't call you by any of those names," she added in her pleasantest voice, "they are not pretty enough."

"Would you mind saying your name again, please," said Murtagh, looking puzzled; "the first one, I mean, that we'll have to call you by?"

Adrienne repeated it slowly once or twice, and the children said it after her. But they didn't seem satisfied with their own pronunciation.

"It will never be the same as yours," exclaimed Bobbo, after two ineffectual attempts. "I'll call you Topsy; it's much easier!"

"I'll tell you what," said Winnie, who had been silently finishing her piece of bread. "Suppose we call her Nessa, after poor Nessa that died." She spoke slowly as children do speak when their words are full of sad memories; and she looked doubtfully at the others, not sure what they would think of her proposition. They hesitated, and a grave silence fell for a moment on the little group. Adrienne regretted that she had been the means of saddening them.

"Who was Nessa?" she asked at length gently.

"She was so pretty," said Winnie, "with long soft brown hair and beautiful big eyes."

"I think she *was* a little bit like you," said Murtagh; "only her hair was browner than yours."

"Oh, Murtagh!" exclaimed Rosie.

"Was she as old as me?" asked Adrienne.

"Oh, no," said Murtagh, "she was quite young; but she did bark so beautifully."

"She did *what!*" exclaimed Adrienne.

"Bark! bark at all the strangers that came near the place."

"Oh!" said Adrienne, completely taken aback. Then — then — she must have been a dog!"

"Yes," said Rosie, hurriedly. "It 's ridiculous Murtagh saying she was like you; she was only a little dog that we found in the road."

"Why, what else did you suppose she was?" asked Murtagh in surprise.

"I — I thought," said Adrienne, blushing, and then brimming over with laughter, — "I thought she was your elder sister."

The children greeted her speech with such peals of laughter that the sadness connected with Nessa was effectually dispersed, and no further hesitation was entertained as to Adrienne's name. Nothing could she be now but "Nessa;" — "Our elder sister Nessa," as Murtagh half-impudently, half-admiringly called her.

"And it 's perfect nonsense, Rosie," said Murtagh, "to say that the other Nessa wasn't like her. Her hair was darker, and so were her eyes; but there was a sort of likeness about them all the same, — a sort of golden look in their faces; wasn't there, Winnie?"

"How silly you are, Murtagh!" replied Rosie contemptuously, "just as if a dog could be like a real grown-up person."

"Yes, they can," replied Murtagh; "and I heard papa saying one day to a gentleman who had a blue ribbon on his coat, at one of the big dinner-parties, that everybody has a sort of a likeness to some animal. There!"

"Then if they have, you 're like a little black mon-key," replied Rosie, hotly and inconsequently; "but it's nonsense all the same, silly nonsense, to say that a little brown dog out on the road is like this Nessa!"

"But it isn't nonsense, Rosie, when I see —" began Murtagh.

Rosie contemptuously turned her back upon him, and Winnie remarked quietly:

"It's no use arguing with Rosie, you know, Myrrh."

"The only chance with her is to knock her down and sit upon her," said Bobbo, good humoredly indifferent.

Murtagh paid no attention to either of them, but followed Rosie, exclaiming eagerly: "Can't you understand if I see a likeness —" Rosie never listened to what her opponent said, and perhaps she thought he was going to follow Bobbo's advice, for she pushed him away so violently that he lost his balance and fell over little Ellie, who was, as usual, sitting upon the floor. The child began to scream; Adrienne sprang forward to pick her up; and in the midst of the confusion the door opened, and Peggy's voice made itself heard, saying: "Whisht, Miss Ellie; get up, Mr. Murtagh, dear; here's Mr. Plunkett."

"Hang Mr. Plunkett!" muttered Murtagh, getting up slowly, and pulling his jacket straight. Adrienne had already picked up Ellie, and carried her in her arms back to the window-sill, but the child had been hurt; and, nothing abashed by the sight of the correct-looking person who appeared in the doorway, she continued to roar with all her might, her little red face puckered up, and bright salt tears dropping on Adrienne's shoulder.

Mr. Plunkett stood in the doorway surveying the scene.

"Is this the best specimen, sir, that you can give Miss Blair of your behavior?" he inquired sternly, addressing Murtagh.

Murtagh made no answer.

"And you are not content," continued Mr. Plunkett, looking at Rosie's hot, angry face, "with displaying such unruliness yourself, but you draw all your brothers and sisters after you."

Murtagh walked over to the piano and began to arrange the music, humming, "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe."

"Incorrigible boy!" said Mr. Plunkett in an undertone. Then turning to Adrienne he saluted her with a bow and a respectfully polite, "Miss Blair, I presume."

Notwithstanding the first movement of hostility that his manner was likely to excite, there was a certain severe dignity in his bearing that commanded respect. He wished to be courteous to Adrienne, and though his piercing eyes did not soften in the least while he spoke with her, he said well and politely all that was natural for him to say to a newly-arrived inmate of Castle Blair.

Yet it was certainly not even his politest manner that commanded respect. It was something deeper—something that seemed indeed almost hidden by his manner; a strength of some kind, the presence of which was felt at once through all the superficial accidents of his nature.

Adrienne, engaged in soothing Ellie, replied to his remarks with a certain gracious gentleness peculiar to her. Presently the child forgot her grief in a sudden curiosity as to the method of buttoning and unbuttoning Adrienne's dress, and with the tears still glistening on her cheeks she began to smile with pleasure as she poked her little fingers through the button-holes. Then Adrienne wiped away the tears, and the conversation with Mr. Plunkett grew into a more animated discussion of the beauties of the surrounding country.

"I hope," said Mr. Plunkett at length, "that you will be kind enough to let me know if there is anything you desire. It is Mr. Blair's wish that I should do everything in my power to make you comfortable. As for the children, when they trouble you, pray have no hesitation in applying to me for assistance. And I hope," he added, raising his voice a little, and addressing the children without looking at them, "that common hospitality will induce you to inflict as little as possible of your wildness upon your cousin."

Adrienne thanked him, but looking across at the children, she said: "I think we are going to be friends; aren't we?"

The children's faces, more or less expressive, showed their acceptance of the treaty. Mr. Plunkett looked as though he felt somehow vaguely disapprobatory; and then, turning round to Murtagh, he changed the subject by saying severely:

"I hear, sir, that you have been at your old tricks again, stealing fruit from the garden."

"You heard wrong, then," returned Murtagh, his brow lowering.

"Don't add untruth to your other misdeeds; you were seen by one of the policemen. It is useless to deny it."

"*Gentlemen* don't tell lies," returned Murtagh, with a sneering accentuation of the words that made them nothing less than insulting. Adrienne was shocked and astonished at the scene. From where she sat on the window-sill, behind Mr. Plunkett, she looked across at Murtagh, while Mr. Plunkett answered angrily:

"What do you mean by speaking to me in such a manner?"

Murtagh's eyes met Adrienne's, and perhaps the expression that he found there made some impression on him. His features relaxed a little, and he remained silent.

Mr. Plunkett continued: "I am tired of speaking of this robbing of the garden. I see nothing but strong measures are of any use, and I give you fair warning that the next time any of you are caught in the garden you shall be severely punished." Mr. Plunkett evidently intended his words to end the conversation, but Murtagh looked blacker than ever, and some answer as bitter as the last trembled on his lips. Before he had time to speak, however, Adrienne exclaimed innocently:

"Why, how the time is going! Don't let me keep you all in-doors. I must unpack a little, and write a letter; but if you will go out now I will join you as soon as I am ready."

Murtagh looked perversely inclined to stay where he was, but an appealing glance from Adrienne persuaded him to follow the others, who rushed at once into the passage.

"Those children are running perfectly wild," said Mr. Plunkett; "they make their own laws, and are the annoyance of every one in the place. It is little short of madness to keep them here under the present conditions; but Winnie and Murtagh suffered severely from fever in India, and Mr. Launcelot Blair refuses to send them to school. It is mistaken treatment. The discipline of school would be far better for them than the riotous life they lead. But it is, of course, for their parents to decide."

"Do they do no lessons at all?" asked Adrienne.

"They do nothing useful, Miss Blair," said Mr. Plunkett severely. Then changing the subject with a decision that showed he wished to say no more upon the matter, he returned to his former measured courteous manner; and after a little further conversation, he wished Adrienne "Good morning," and left her to write her letters.

Whatever Mr. Plunkett might think of the children, they had, as has been seen, no high opinion of him. On this occasion they were no sooner well outside the school-room than Bobbo relieved his feelings by exclaiming:

"Oh, that brute Plunkett! wouldn't I like to punch his head!"

"It's no good thinking about him, Myrrh," said Winnie, seeing that the black look had not faded from Murtagh's face. "Let's do something. Shall we go and steal some more apples? I am awfully hungry."

"Oh, no!" said Rosie, "don't let us do that; but I'll tell you what'll be fun. Let's get some brown cake from Donnie, and go and boil potatoes on one of the islands."

Winnie agreeing, the little girls ran off to the kitchen; and Bobbo, left alone with Murtagh, returned to his subject.

"I say, Murtagh," he continued, "we must just do something to that old Plunkett. He 's getting worse and worse."

"I think I 'll kill him some day!" burst out Murtagh, with such concentrated passion in his voice that Bobbo looked at him quite startled, and paused for a minute before he answered:

"I don't vote for killing, exactly. But I 'd like to dip him in the river, or do something or other that would just take him down a peg."

But Murtagh did not seem disposed to talk any more about it at that moment. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and slowly followed the others to the kitchen, where Mrs. Donegan was buttering slices of brown cake, and at the same time declaring that "she wasn't going to be getting them into bad habits of eating between their meals."

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CHAPTER III.

ADRIENNE'S letters were very quickly written. She was anxious to go out to the children, and to make acquaintance with the place. But when she went to look for them they were nowhere to be found.

Enchanted with the place, which, neglected as it was, seemed to her very beautiful, she wandered about for a time in the pleasure ground and shrubberies that lay at the back of the house; and then, tempted by the lovely brightness of the morning, she set off to make further discoveries.

Land seemed to be no consideration in that part of the world; a wide park, dotted with trees and clustering bushes, lay stretched out on three sides of the house.

The grass was too wet to cross after yesterday's rain, but a sunny avenue, winding away between old thorns and oaks, offered a charming walk, and as Adrienne went along she looked around her in delight.

On the left the ground sloped down to the bed of a broad rocky stream, which wound about and flowed, as she knew, past that end of the house in which was the big window of the school-room. To the right, undulating park-land stretched for some distance, and, beyond the park, trees and fields and hedges seemed to grow closer and closer together, till out of the indistinctness rose suddenly a bold line of purple hills. In the park, soft-eyed cows were cropping the autumn grass. Thrushes were singing in the thorns. Red haws lay scattered in profusion under the trees. The air was pure, and the earth smelt sweet after the rain.

Adrienne was so glad the place was pretty that for more than half a mile she walked along, just enjoying it and thinking of nothing else. She had for the moment forgotten the children, when, enticed by a little side path, she turned off the avenue and came suddenly upon a child standing on tiptoe in the wet grass, and stretching up in a vain endeavor to reach a branch of roseberries that hung temptingly out from a clump of bushes. She was not the least like the children Adrienne had seen hitherto. A sylph-like, tender little thing, she looked as though a sudden gust of wind would blow her right away. And then she was carefully dressed; the golden hair that hung down to her waist was neatly brushed, and the hand stretched up to the roseberries was cased in a warm cloth glove.

Adrienne stepped on to the grass and succeeded in reaching the branch. Blushing and surprised the little girl thanked her with a sweet smile. At the same moment a voice exclaimed, "Marion, Marion, for goodness sake come off that sopping grass!" and looking up, Adrienne perceived a lady, in a shiny black silk gown, who with an anxious face was hurrying down the path.

"Let me see your feet," she continued, coming up to them and taking Marion's hand as the child stepped obediently on to the path. "Yes, they 're soaking wet! You must come back and change them at once! I beg your pardon, Miss Blair," she added, looking up at Adrienne. "I know I ought to have spoken to you first, but this child is so delicate she keeps me in a perpetual fright. How could you think of going on the grass, Marion?"

"I 'm so sorry, mother," replied the child in her sweet little voice, "I quite forgot."

"Well, well, come back and change as quickly as you can, and perhaps there 'll be no harm done. And you, Miss Blair, I am sure your feet must be wet too! Will you come in, and let me have your boots dried in the kitchen? The house is quite close. I am Mrs. Plunkett."

The last piece of information came out with an odd little confused jerk. It was an after-thought for which Adrienne was grateful; she had not the slightest idea who her newly-made acquaintance might be.

"Thank you," she said; "I don't think my feet are at all wet. I was only on the grass for a moment."

"Ah! but you don't know this climate; it is most treacherous; you have no idea how the wet penetrates. Marion, don't bring that litter into the house, there 's a good child." As she spoke she pulled the branch of roseberries out of Marion's hand and threw it away, continuing in the meantime without a single full stop between her sentences: "There 's nothing more dangerous than wet feet, I can assure you — I lost my poor sister through nothing in the world but that, — and Mr. Plunkett's mother often said, 'anything else you please, James, but no wet feet, I beg.'"

It was difficult to find suitable answers to such remarks, but Mrs. Plunkett did not require answers; she was like a cuckoo clock, once pull the weight down and she went perfectly by herself.

Marion looked regretfully after her pretty red branch, but she said nothing, and Mrs. Plunkett continued to relate anecdotes of people who had died from the consequences of wet feet, till a few more turns in the path brought them to the back of a neat-looking house and garden.

"Pray walk in," said Mrs. Plunkett, throwing open the gate. And in a minute or two more, Adrienne, good-humoredly helpless in the hands of the fussy little woman, found herself sitting without her boots in a wicker arm-chair beside the nursery fire. A beautiful nursery it was — a real honest nursery, where it would seem impossible for children to be anything but healthy and happy; beautiful, not from any special luxury of furniture, but by its exquisite cleanliness. The white boarded floor was as spotless as scrubbing could make it; the brass knobs of the fireplace glittered in the sunlight; the window-panes could not have been more brilliantly transparent.

Two little children in white pinafores were playing with wooden bricks on the floor. Marion, perched on a chair on the other side of the fireplace, stretched out two little blue-stockinged feet to the blaze; and while Nurse took the boots down stairs, the clean fat baby was transferred to Adrienne's lap.

Finding that Adrienne was fond of children, Mrs. Plunkett grew confidential over the sayings and doings of her own four; and then suddenly interrupting herself in the midst of a description of little Johnnie's appearance when he had the measles, she exclaimed in a tone half-curious, half-confidential:

"But your cousins, Miss Blair! Have they left you alone already? I *should* have thought they would have liked to show you the place. Ah, it 's very sad to see children lead such lives."

"Yes," said Adrienne, trying to disengage her hair from the convulsive grasp with which Master Baby had seized upon one of the coils, "it is almost the same as though they had neither father nor mother, poor little things."

"It is their own fault, I assure you; entirely their own fault. For shame, baby! is that the way you treat ladies who are kind enough to nurse you, sir? Mr. Plunkett and I were prepared to take every interest in them," she continued, bending over Adrienne, and helping to extricate her hair from baby's fat, rosy fingers. "We were away for our summer trip when Murtagh and Winnie first arrived. Poor little Marion was the only one we had then, and we were very near losing her that same summer. You would never suppose, would you, that she 's nearly four years older than any of these; she 's such a little mite to look at. When we came back, we found that that poor foolish Mrs. Donegan had already done a great deal of harm. There now, Master Baby, keep your hands to yourself, sir.

"The two children were making themselves ill with pining, and she encouraging them, and letting them do every mortal thing they liked, under the pretence that they must be amused. My husband saw at once that it was his duty to remonstrate; he was quite shocked to see the way things were going. And I 'm sure it was enough to shock any one to see those two children, with their heads cropped after the fever, and their wizened yellow faces, and their little sticks of arms; they were enough to frighten one. I assure you I scarcely liked to look much at them just at that time.

"They had suffered so terribly from fever that Mr. Launcelot insisted upon their having what he called perfect rest. He would not even allow them to have a governess. He said that their brains were too active, and that the thing he most desired to hear of them was that they were growing as ignorant as the village children. Some people certainly have queer fancies, and he, of all people in the world, so clever as he is! Well, I hope he 's satisfied now.

"But my husband was determined to do his duty by them. He spoke sharply to Mrs. Donegan about her behavior, and there were most unpleasant scenes between them. She came down here one evening and said the most dreadful things. She told me myself, Miss

Blair, that he ought to be ashamed to be so hard on poor little fatherless, motherless children, who were pining for a bit of love. I remember her expression quite well; I was quite upset after she went away. But my husband never minds those things. He does his duty, and he doesn't mind what anybody says. He spoke to Murtagh himself next day, and told him how sinful it was to give way like that to every fanciful feeling that came over him, — one minute pining and miserable, and the next rampaging like wild animals all about everywhere, not minding a word anybody said to them. But it was all no use: Murtagh wouldn't answer a word, and from that day to this they 've just gone on growing worse and worse.

"My husband has tried severity with them; but Mr. Blair doesn't like to hear of their being punished, and James hesitates to take the responsibility entirely upon himself. If they were his own children he 'd soon bring them to order. But why should he hesitate to take the responsibility? that is what I ask him. He manages all Mr. Launcelot's business matters the same as he does Mr. Blair's. Mr. Launcelot trusts him just as much as Mr. Blair does, and he gave him full authority to do whatever he thought needful for them.

"He worries himself about those children ten times as much as he 's ever had occasion to worry about his own. Why, their governesses alone have given him more trouble than all his own servants put together, and it isn't a bit of use, as I 'm always telling him. What 's the good of worrying about other people's children? They are not one bit grateful. I really believe, Miss Blair, that they hate him; I believe those children hate every one; there 's never been one day's peace since they 've been here."

Exhausted by her own vehemence, Mrs. Plunkett paused to take breath, and Marion, profiting by the opportunity, said in a slow gentle way that seemed years older than her little-self: "I don't think they hate me, mother"

"What do you know about it, child?" asked Mrs. Plunkett.

"Because," said Marion, raising her eyes from the fire to her mother's face, "I looked at them in church, and a butterfly flew in, and went on the side of Murtagh's nose, and I laughed, and he laughed too, quite kind."

Adrienne could not help smiling at the earnest, half pleading tone in which the child spoke, but Mrs. Plunkett said: "Nonsense, Maimy, you don't know anything about it! No; I don't believe there's any one in this world they care one bit about, except it is little Frankie."

As Mrs. Plunkett enunciated for the second time her disbelief in the children's powers of affection, some one called from down-stairs, "Marion! Maimy!"

"It's father!" exclaimed the child, springing off her chair. "Back already! Yes, father, I'm coming. Nurse, my slippers please, quick!"

But nurse had gone down-stairs to fetch the dried boots, and while Marion went to the cupboard to find her own slippers, a firm regular step quickly ascended the staircase, and Mr. Plunkett entered the nursery, holding in his hand the very branch of roseberries which had brought about all the wet feet.

Adrienne had been surprised at the voice in which Marion's name had been called; it was scarcely to be recognized as belonging to the stern man she had seen that morning. But she was still more surprised to see the soft beaming welcome that broke out over little Marion's face as her father entered the room.

She was sitting on the floor, putting on her slippers, one little blue leg stretched out, the other doubled up to enable her to button her shoe-strap. She did not jump up to kiss her father, but she turned her face up towards him, with a sweet glad look in her eyes.

"Are you going to have dinner with us after all, Fardie?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied, looking down with a smile at the upturned face. "I'm going to dine here to-day. I shall go to the farms to-morrow instead. See," he continued, holding out towards her the branch of roseberries, "I've brought you something pretty. It was lying in the middle of the path, and I thought it would please you."

"Why, it's my own branch! How could you know it was just what I wanted?"

The shoe was fastened by this time, so she got up from the floor, holding the branch of roseberries in one hand, and slipped the other hand into her father's. Then he perceived Adrienne. A few polite sentences were interchanged; the boots were brought; baby was given into Nurse's arms; and Adrienne, wishing them all "Good morning," walked back along the avenue, her pretty golden head as full as it would hold of thoughts about all these new people.

She was destined to have further lights on the subject of her little cousins' behavior, however, that morning.

As she approached the house she found that the hall-door was shut, and passing round to the back in order to find another entrance, she ventured to open what seemed to her like a kitchen door. It was not the door of the kitchen. She found herself on the threshold of a large, airy room, littered all over with clothes in various stages of washing, drying, and ironing. Mrs. Donegan, with her sleeves tucked up, was busy ironing print frocks at a large table near the fire; and at the sound of the door opening she exclaimed:

"Do, for goodness' sake, shut that door, Kate. Why ever don't you stop in the kitchen and attend to your dinner?"

"It's not Kate," said Adrienne; "I came round this way because the hall-door was shut. May I come in?"

Mrs. Donegan looked up, and grew quite red with confusion as she discerned her mistake.

"Oh, Ma'am, I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed, setting down her iron and coming forward to meet Adrienne. "I'm sure I never thought to see you here, and the laundry in such a mess too; of a Friday there is so much to do. Walk in, Ma'am, if you please."

"Please don't let me disturb you," said Adrienne, as she shut the door. "Can I get through to the house this way?"

"Yes, Ma'am," replied Mrs. Donegan, taking up her iron again, "it's always through here or through the kitchen the children come."

"Have they come back yet?" asked Adrienne.

"Lord, no, Ma'am! they were in the kitchen with me this morning, getting some bits of griddle-cake to go off with somewhere, an' if they're back to dinner it's as much as they'll be."

"You can't tell me where to find them, can you?" suggested Adrienne.

"Tell you where to find them!" exclaimed Mrs. Donegan, pushing her spectacles up on her forehead, and pausing in her work to look at Adrienne. "It's plain you don't know much about their ways yet, Ma'am. Maybe it's up the mountains they are, or maybe up the river, or maybe across the fields, five miles away by this time. But wherever it is, ye might look for them a month o' Sundays, and never find them if ye're wanting them; and so sure as ye're not wanting them they'll turn up fast enough, bless their hearts!"

"They live out of doors a great deal, don't they?" asked Adrienne, smiling at Mrs. Donegan's description of their proceedings.

"God bless you, yes, Ma'am. They'd never be confined with stoppin' in a house, but out and about, no matter what weather it is. They're a bit wild like, but they're the best-hearted children ever lived. But won't you sit down, Ma'am," added Mrs. Donegan, interrupting herself to set a chair near the table.

"If I stay may I help you?" asked Adrienne, attracted to the free-spoken old woman, and very willing to stay and talk to her. "I can *tuyauter* these frills. I don't know what that word is in English."

She took up a pair of gaufreing tongs as she spoke, and Mrs. Donegan looked amused at the notion of her help.

"Sure you don't know anything about such work, an' it's not so easy as it looks. But you may try if you like, Miss," she added good-humoredly, dropping the more formal "Ma'am," and from that time forth adopting Adrienne as one of the children of the house.

Adrienne, all unconscious of the greatness of the concession Mrs. Donegan had made in allowing her to touch her linen, laid her hat on one side, and in another minute was sitting gaufreing pillow-case frills in so business-like a manner that Mrs. Donegan, looking on critically, exclaimed after a minute or two:

"Upon my word, Miss, you do it better than I do it myself."

Adrienne laughed, and Mrs. Donegan, going back to her work, returned to the current of her thoughts.

"I could tell you more about those children than anybody else that's here," she continued. "But whatever you do, Miss, don't you go to believe anything Mr. Plunkett says about them. It's not the like of him can understand these children. Wasn't I here in the nursery in old Mrs. Blair's time, and nursemaid to Mr. Launcelot himself? I know what Master Launce was when his mother died, and I know what sort his children's come of. And they're Mr. Launcelot's children to the very backbone; that they are, Miss, as you'll see when you come to know them better. Master Harry was always quieter, but you're not much like him, Miss, except when you laugh you have a look of him about the eyes, I think."

Mrs. Donegan liked to talk, but she liked to talk after her own fashion, so before Adrienne could hear anything about the children she had to listen to a panegyric upon their father, which wound up with an account of how he married Mrs. Launcelot, who was "very nice for the matter of that; a Catholic too she is, just like your own mother, Miss, and a perfect lady, Mr. Launcelot wouldn't have married none other, but a little, gentle, delicate bit of a thing, who had a French maid to look after her, and let the children do whatever they pleased."

Then, and not till then, Adrienne was told that Mr. and Mrs. Launcelot had been in India now nearly seven years, and how Winnie and Murtagh had been sent home four years ago. "And Mr. Launcelot wrote me a letter with his own hand," added Donnie, "asking me to take care of his two little orphans till he came himself to fetch them; and he told me to 'mother them, when they were lonely, the way I'd mothered him long ago when he needed it.' Those were his very words. Many an' many a time I've read the letter. And when I saw the poor little things drooping and pining, I used to think o' the night, thirty-two years ago now come Michaelmas, when the poor missis died, an' I crep' into the nursery after the old nurse was asleep, an' Master Launce was sobbing in his bed; and when I tried to comfort him like, he knelt up in his little nightgown an' put his two arms round about my neck,—and, 'Oh, Biddy,' says he, 'what *shall* I do now?'" Donnie's tears were running down at the remembrance.

"And he laid his head upon my shoulder, and he was that tired out with crying that after a bit he fell asleep kneeling up against me there; an' I carried him away into my own bed, and kept him warm till the morning. And then," she continued, indignantly sniffing away her tears, "tell me I don't know what I'm doing with his children. Deed, faith, I know a deal better than them as tells me such nonsense."

"They were very lonely when they first came, were they not?" said Adrienne, remembering Murtagh's words of the evening before.

"Deed they were! poor little lambs, sick and lonely enough; they scarce cared to do anything like, and I never could get them off my mind. Then after a bit, when the summer came, they used to go off whole days up the mountains; and when I saw that pleased them I used to give them their dinner to take with them, and then they took to rampaging about, and I began to grow easier, bless their hearts! For there's nothing like it, take my word for it, Miss.

"When Miss Rose and Master Bobbo were sent over after with the baby — Miss Ellie that is — they were every bit as yellow and skinny like as Master Murtagh and Miss Winnie; and where would you see finer, heartier-looking children now than the four of them? I'm not for cossetting children too much. Give 'em plenty of good fresh air, and plenty o' good food, and let 'em alone, that's what I say. Stuff o' rubbish, confining them an' regulatin' 'em! Time enough for that by-an'-by when they go to school."

"But don't you think," said Adrienne, looking up with a smile, "that now they have had the fresh air and the food they might have just a little learning too, without doing them any harm?"

"Well," replied Donnie, with the air of one willing to make concessions, "I don't say but what they might have a governess, and let them do a bit of learning every day. But when they first came Mr. Launcelot said they wasn't to be allowed to see a book at all, but running about wild in the good mountain air; and quite right he was too. And since then they begged so hard not to have a governess in the house, that Mr. Blair giv' in to them, and got them governesses from Ballyboden.

"But what with one thing and another they never stay. One says it's too far to come every day, and another says she can't manage the children, an' the last went away close upon three months ago because Mr. Murtagh slipped a handful of hailstones down her back. But, Lord! it doesn't signify; they weren't any good, when they did come; they hadn't got the wit to teach these children.

"They tell me there'll be a real clever German governess got next year, when the young gentlemen go to school. But it don't make much matter one way or the other. If they never got a governess at all, there's no fear but what Mr. Launcelot's children would be plenty clever enough. They may be a bit wild-like, but if they 've got the good blood in them, they 'll never go far wrong. I 'm old, and I 've seen a lot o' people one way or another, backwards and forwards in the world, an' I tell you, Miss, you may always let the good blood have its way; it 's only the half-an'-half folks take such a deal o' looking after.

"Then, it isn't every one can understand that, and that 's where the trouble is. With these children, now, ye can manage them with a crick o' your little finger, if you take them the right way. They 'd give you the coats off o' their backs and the bit out o' their mouths if they thought you wanted it. But they won't be driven; it isn't a bit of use talking about it. There 's nothing but gentleness is a bit o' good with them, and that 's where it is them and Mr. Plunkett is such enemies."

Such were Donnie's opinions, and she descanted upon them at length, till Kate came to say that she thought it was no use waiting any longer for the children, and she had sent up Miss Blair's luncheon to the dining room.

Mr. Blair did not take luncheon, so Adrienne sat alone at the head of the big table. She spent her afternoon alone, too, and had plenty of leisure to decide that Murtagh was right; the drawing-room was a musty-smelling old room. She opened the windows wide, and filled the old china bowls and vases with flowers, and pushed the furniture about till the room looked more habitable. Then she unpacked her needlework and her music, and tried to occupy herself; but finally, she was very glad when at half-past five Brown came to inform her that six o'clock was the dinner hour — an intimation which she took as a respectful hint that in Brown's opinion it was now time for her to dress.

CHAPTER IV.

THE children meanwhile had completely forgotten the existence of their new cousin. After leaving the kitchen they raced along with their spoil towards the river. The morning was deliciously bright; there was a fresh scent in the air that made them all feel inclined to caper about without exactly knowing why. Even Murtagh forgot his troubles with Mr. Plunkett, and raced and shouted with the others.

Their river was a branch of a broad mountain stream, but now at the end of the dry season the water did not come down with a steady rolling current as in the winter. It came trickling, sparkling, dancing between the great bits of moss-grown rock that strewed its course, finding for itself thousands of little channels, tumbling unexpectedly from time to time head over heels down the side of a big stone, and then lying still and clear in pools sheltered by the rocks. Only in the very middle was there anything like a real current, and there the water flowed swiftly along in uneven ripples, slapping up against obtrusive rocks with a ruffle of white spray that made the delight of the children.

But what was not a delight in that river? There was simply no end to its resources. There was the water to splash and paddle in, with stones for those who liked to practice hardening their feet, and patches of sand where one could enjoy that delicious half-tickling sensation of feet sinking and sand oozing up between all one's toes; then there were the pools for sailing boats; and the current in the middle for floating hats, with all the fun of not being quite sure whether they could be caught in time.

And the rocks covered over with thick sunny moss that seemed to grow on purpose for warming cold feet, and all the wonderful things that were to be found in the river, — things that came floating down, things that grew, and things that had got there somehow. Then there were the islands; the river's course was dotted with them. And then there were the trout and the minnows.

It was to one of the islands that the children were going now. Notwithstanding the heavy rain of the preceding afternoon the night had been fine, and when the children got down upon the beach they found their beloved river a little fuller perhaps and rather more energetic in its twirls and dashes, but just as bright and as tempting as it always was on these lovely autumn mornings. The water looked like clear brown crystal in the sunlight, and soon everything was forgotten in the excitement of looking for trout. It was one of their favorite occupations; but not a fish did they see this morning, till, just as they were crossing the stepping-stones to a little island, Winnie pulled Murtagh's jacket, and pointed silently to where a great fellow lay under a rock, the sun shining on his spotted side.

"Golly loo!" whispered Murtagh, "isn't he a beauty?"

They stood a minute watching, but the trout scarcely moved.

"I say, how still he keeps," whispered Winnie: "I believe I could catch him in my hands."

In a minute she had set her saucepan down on the stone, had pulled off her shoes and stockings, and was cautiously stepping into the water. The icy cold of it made her screw up her eyes, but on she went trying to make as little splash as possible. Still the trout never moved. Murtagh's interest was intense; he could scarcely refrain from giving vent to his excitement in a shout. Winnie could hardly believe her own good fortune. She got close up behind the trout; she bent down; her hands were just closing on it, when, — there was a tremendous splash behind her, and in an instant the trout had whisked far away out of sight. She closed her hands with a convulsive grasp at its tail, but it was no use, — it was clean gone.

Even Winnie's equanimity was upset by such a disappointment.

"You little idiot, Murtagh! you *might* have waited till I 'd caught him," she said, angrily.

"I beg your pardon awfully, Winnie," said Murtagh, who with both legs up to the knees in water was sitting npon the rock a picture of abject penitence; "I 'm dreadfully sorry. I didn't do it on purpose. I was watching you, and I didn't see I was come to the edge of the stone."

"Who said you did it on purpose?" replied Winnie unappeased. "You might have looked where you were going."

"I 'm awfully sorry," repeated Murtagh.

But Winnie didn't feel as if she could forgive him yet. She turned away in silence, and occupied herself with rescuing from the water her boots and stockings, which had of course been kicked off the stone when Murtagh slipped.

By the time she had done that, she had recovered herself a little; and presently, having fished out the garters, she turned round again and said with something very like a twinkle in her eye:

"As you threw it in you may fetch it out."

She pointed as she spoke to where the saucepan lay on the bottom of the pool. Murtagh having employed himself in taking off his wet boots and stockings, hooked it out cleverly with his foot; then Winnie slung boots and stockings and saucepan all on a garter round her neck, and tucking up her frock said quite cheerily:

"Never mind; come along, and let 's see if we can't catch him somewhere else."

Just at that moment a shout arose from the other side of the island, and Bobbo, bursting through the bushes, exclaimed in breathless delight that Rosie had caught a trout "in her hands in the water." Winnie told her of her disappointment.

"What's up with the trout, I wonder?" said Bobbo. "Generally they're off like lightning if you so much as look at them. By the Holy Poker, there's another!" he added, suddenly beginning to strip off his shoes and stockings, while Murtagh practically suggested that some one had been throwing lime into the water.

But Winnie's sharp eyes saw the trout as soon as Bobbo, and she had the start of him, being already in the water; so, signing to the others to be quiet, she advanced cautiously up stream till she got close behind it, Bobbo pausing meanwhile with one boot in his hand to watch her success. Then, bending down, she quickly clasped her little brown hands under the trout, and with a successful jerk threw it high and dry on to a sunny bit of rock.

"Hurrah!" shouted Murtagh. "She's got it. Come along, Bobbo; off with your other boot, and let's go up the river and try for some more."

"What shall we do with Ellie?" asked Rose. "There's no beach a little higher up where the river gets narrower, and she'll never be able to jump from one rock to another."

The children were far too much excited to pay great attention to such a trifle.

"Oh, she must manage somehow!" said Winnie. "Come along. Pull off your boots and socks, Ellie, there's a good child, and don't be afraid of the water, it won't hurt you."

Ellie looked very doubtfully at her feet, and then at the water, as if she did not at all like the prospect, however, Rosie didn't wait for her to make objections, but, pulling off the little boots, lifted her down into the stream, and then waded off herself after the others.

Ellie had her own ideas of duty, and knew what was expected of her when she was out with people bigger and stronger than herself; so after one shuddering exclamation of dismay as her feet first touched the water, she tried bravely to do as the others did.

But she found it very hard work. The water was bitterly cold, and where it was only deep enough to come a few inches above the other children's ankles it was already nearly up to her knees. She saw that the others twisted up their frocks, so she tried to twist hers up too, but she could only get up one little bit at a time, and the rest dabbled against her legs. Soon the hem was all wet, and her petticoats were wet, and the frills of her little white knickerbockers were wet. She was cold all over. The pebbles at the bottom hurt her feet. And then she didn't seem to get along one bit.

For a while she held tight on to the bit of frock that she was lifting up so boldly in front, and tried to encourage herself from time to time by saying half-aloud, "Ellie can walk in the river too, Ellie can;" but the big blue eyes often filled with tears, and her little stock of heroism began soon to melt away.

At last there came a bend in the river; the water grew deeper; and Ellie, getting into a place where there was a slight current, was very nearly taken off her legs. She saved herself by catching at a rock, but when she looked up to call one of the others to help her she found that they were out of sight.

That was more than she could bear. She was all lost now, and she never would be able to get out of the river any more, and it was no good trying to be brave, so she gave it all up, and sobbing out, "Oh, me is so told! me is so told!" she laid her head down on the rock and began to cry at the very tip top of her voice.

The others meanwhile had completely forgotten her. The fish were, as Murtagh thought, stupefied with lime, but not so stupefied as to be incapable of trying to save themselves from pursuing hands. The chase after them raised the children's spirits to the highest pitch. The banks of the river were wild and more or less wooded. All civilization might have been miles away.

Not a soul did the children pass, except one disconso late-looking little girl sitting upon the bank. But, bare-legged and bare-armed, their hats hanging down upon their backs, their hair blown wildly about, with sparkling eyes and laughing faces, they splashed along in the bright cold water, or jumped from rock to rock to warm their feet, oblivious of everything in this world save the speckled trout for which they looked so eagerly in the clear brown pools by the rocks. Fortunately for Ellie, however, the thought of her flashed at last through Murtagh's mind.

"Why, Rosie," he exclaimed, "what's become of Ellie? she's not in sight."

The reflection caused some dismay for a moment among the children; but Bobbo volunteered to go back and fetch her, so they comfortably concluded that it was all right, and troubled themselves no further. Back he went accordingly, and Ellie's loud-voiced grief soon guided him to the spot where she stood. But when he had got there, and comforted her, and rubbed her chilled legs warm again, and wrung the water out of her skirt, and rolled up her damp knickerbockers, he found that it was all very well, but she had had enough of trying to be heroic, and nothing would induce her to enter the water again.

It was a difficulty that he had not counted upon, but there was no getting over it,—coaxing and scolding were alike in vain. Good-natured as he was, he was not going to lose his share in the fishing; and moreover, he was accustomed to solve all difficulties in the readiest manner that came to hand; so, putting her on his back, he just waded to shore, and trotted along the bank till he overtook the other children. They could settle together what was to be done with her.

He found them in a state of wild excitement. Winnie had that instant caught another fish, and Rosie, opening the skirt of her dress which she had gathered up as a bag, displayed three shining trout caught by herself and Murtagh.

"That's five altogether!" shouted Murtagh. "And we 're going up to Long Island, and we 'll light a fire there and cook them. Rosie 's got the cake and things tied up in her hat, so it 's not a bit wet, and that 'll be loads for our dinner."

"Oh, that will be glorious!" cried Bobbo. "But look here, I say, Myrrh, what 'll we do with Ellie? she can't get along a bit in the water."

"Couldn't you take her through the woods?" suggested Rosie.

"And miss all the fishing on the way up!" replied Bobbo. "Thank you, I 've missed enough of the fun already. I think it 's your turn now."

"Oh, no, indeed it isn't," replied Rosie. "I have her all day long. It 's only fair that you boys should have the trouble of her sometimes."

"It 's always women who look after the babies," said Murtagh.

"Well, I 'm not going to this time," said Rosie decidedly. "It really is too bad that our pleasure is always spoilt with having to think about that tiresome child."

Little Ellie's head began to droop on to Bobbo's shoulder, as she looked anxiously at the children's faces. She was somewhat oppressed by a sense of her own wickedness in refusing to go into the water again, and she felt that Rosie's reproach was not altogether undeserved. Still, though she was accustomed to be called tiresome, she did not like it; and besides, a terrible fear was arising in her mind that Rosie would make them leave her alone. The question was perplexing. Whatever Ellie might think, the children knew that they couldn't leave her there alone; but then they really could not give up their delightful expedition, and they were none of them at all inclined to start off alone with her through the woods. What was to be done?

Suddenly a brilliant idea struck Winnie.

"That girl we saw sitting on the bank!" she exclaimed. "I think I know her; I think she comes out of one of our cottages. Let 's get her to take Ellie through the woods. We 'll give her some of our dinner when we get up to the island, and it 'll be great fun for her."

No sooner suggested than agreed to, and springing lightly from rock to rock Winnie quickly disappeared in the direction she had pointed out.

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CHAPTER V.

WITHOUT being put in the least out of breath by her rapid course she reached the spot, and finding the girl still sitting there plunged at once into conversation by saying:

"I think you live in one of our cottages, don 't you? What 's your name, please?"

But the answer, "Theresa Curran," was given in such a miserable voice that Winnie paused and looked at her with some attention.

The girl did not look up, but remained sitting with her elbows on her knees, and her face supported on her hands, staring in front of her as though Winnie were not there. Her face was tear-stained, her eyelids swollen with crying, and there was a look of despairing wretchedness in her face which made Winnie feel that she could not go on with her message. So after standing beside her for a moment or two in silence she said: "Is there anything the matter?"

The girl did not answer; and Winnie repeated: "What 's the matter?"

"I dunno what to do at all at all," replied the child drearily.

"Why?" said Winnie, "what has happened?"

Then, as though she couldn't keep it to herself any longer, the girl's grief burst forth in a passionate wail, and she sobbed out: "Oh, whatever will I do, whatever will I do? He 'll kill me if I go home again."

"What is it?" said Winnie, somewhat awe-stricken. "What have you done? Who is it will kill you?"

"Oh, it 's the rent!" sobbed the child, "and mother so sick and all, and he so savage at givin' it. He 'll kill me; I know he will. He said he would;" and between fear and grief her words became too incoherent for Winnie to be able to understand.

"Have you lost it?" asked Winnie.

But the child's grief seemed too overpowering for her to give any answer; she only rocked herself backwards and forwards, sobbing as if her heart would break.

Winnie stood looking at her for a moment, not quite knowing what to do; then to her great relief Murtagh appeared at her side.

"What 's the matter?" he whispered.

"I don't exactly know; somebody's going to kill her," returned Winnie. But Murtagh's presence made her feel as if she knew better what to do; so she climbed up the bank, and knelt down beside the girl, saying:

"Look here, don't cry like that. Here 's my brother and there are some more of us down there, and we won't let anybody kill you. Besides, he wouldn't kill you really I don't expect."

"Yes, he will," replied the girl. "He always does what he says."

"But he can't," said Murtagh. "He 'll be put in prison, and hanged himself if he does." The child sobbed on, giving no heed to Murtagh's words.

"What 's he going to kill you for?" asked Murtagh, climbing up after Winnie.

"When I lost the goat he said he 'd kill me next time," replied the child. "Look here," she continued, rapidly unfastening her frock, and displaying her bare neck and shoulder. "That 's what he did to me yesterday." Then burying her face in her hands she burst into tears again.

The little thin shoulder was covered with a great bruise all blue and red. Down the centre of it the skin was broken in a long zigzag crack ; the rapid movement of throwing off her dress had caused the blood to ooze out, and Winnie and Murtagh stood transfixed with pity and horror as they saw the dark red drops trickle slowly down.

"Oh, Win," said Murtagh, "what can we do?"

Winnie, after standing perfectly still for a moment looking at the bruise, went to the bank, and leaning over tried to scoop up some water in her hat.

Rosie and Bobbo, seeing that something was the matter, came up.

"Just give me my hat full of water, will you?" said Winnie, "and have either of you got a pocket-handkerchief?"

"What 's the matter?" inquired Rosie, filling Winnie's hat for her, and handing it up as she spoke.

Winnie didn't trouble herself to answer; and Rosie and Bobbo, climbing up the bank, stood silent when they saw the wound on Theresa's shoulder.

Winnie dipped the handkerchief in water and gently bathed the bruise.

"How horrible!" said Rosie, presently.

"Great, cowardly scoundrel," ejaculated Murtagh.

"That 's nothing," said the girl, her grief beginning to subside a little under the influence of the children's earnest sympathy. "He nearly broke me all to pieces entirely, the day I lost the goat, and he said he 'd kill me downright next time. Oh! and then there 's mother!" she added, her tears bursting forth again. "Whatever will she do? and I daren't go back. I know it 's with that great stick he 'll kill me, and I can't bear to be killed ; I can't bear it."

"Don't cry," said Murtagh. "You shan't be killed. We 'll protect her ; won't we?" he added, turning confidently to the others.

"That we will," said Winnie. "Why, ye live on our land, don't you? So we 're bound to protect you even if we didn't want to."

"Yez won't be able," replied the girl. "Ye don't know what he is at all when he's angry. He'd kill every one of you if ye came between us."

"What an awful man!" ejaculated Rosie, in a tone of horror.

"I don't care if he does," said Murtagh, "you'll just see if we can't prevent him touching you."

"Because you don't know," said Winnie eagerly. "We're bound up in a tribe, and we always settled we'd protect everybody against people who wanted to prevent them being free; and then, you live on our land; that makes you one of the followers of our tribe, and you'll just see if we let him touch you."

"How can yez help it?" said the girl, half-incredulous, but in spite of herself half convinced.

"Oh!" began Winnie, confidently. And there she stopped, not having as yet the slightest idea of how they were going to "help it." She consulted the others with her eyes, but confronted with the practical difficulty, no one was able immediately to propose a plan.

"Ye don't know what he's like," said Theresa, the momentary flash of hope dying out of her white face.

"Who is he?" asked Rose. "Is he your father?"

"It's my step-father, and mother had such work to get the rent from him. And now we'll be turned out all the same, an' he'll be that mad he won't know what he's doing. And it'll just break mother's heart, an' finish her off altogether, so it will! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! whatever will I do?"

The children looked at her in silence for a little while, then Rosie asked: "Have you lost the rent?"

"Yes, down there," she answered raising her head. "I was jumpin' over the stones goin' across to the little house to pay it, an' I'd got the two sovereigns in my hand when my foot slipped, and they flew out of my hand into the water before ever I knew they were gone at all. Just in the very middle, where the water's runnin' fast, and it swept them clean away."

"I 'll tell you what!" exclaimed Murtagh, who had been thinking deeply, "we 'll take her up to the island and hide her there; then afterwards we 'll manage."

"Yes! yes!" cried Winnie; "of course, that 's the plan. How stupid of me not to think of that! Come along; let 's go up at once for fear he might come and catch her here. No one 'll be able to touch you there," she added, turning to Theresa; "it 's beautifully hidden, you 'll see. And we can take you up provisions every day, and keep you as long as ever we like. Oh, Murtagh, what a splendid idea!"

"Spiffing!" exclaimed Bobbo. "Come along; let us be moving up. We 've got a jolly lot of fish here," he explained to Theresa, "and we 'll all have dinner together."

The children were so charmed with the notion that Theresa could not help being cheered. She still demurred, wondering what would become of her sick mother; but the children overbore her objections, and in a few minutes they were all going up the river's bank together.

The fish which had before been so absorbing were now completely forgotten in the interest of hearing about Theresa's life. Questions innumerable did the children ask; and Theresa, unused to sympathy, poured out willingly all her woes. It was a common enough story, but to the children it seemed almost too terrible to be true; her mother too sick to work, her step-father drinking nearly all he earned, and leaving them often for days at a time without food or money. To be hungry, cold, and beaten, such was her daily life. "And there 's mother just dying away," she added; "I heard Mrs. O'Toole saying she 'd never last out the winter."

But the kindness and the confident promises of help with which the children heard her story so cheered Theresa, that before long she began almost to enjoy talking over her troubles, and was even ready to laugh at one or two sallies of Murtagh's wit.

After a time the immediate bank of the river became impassable. Theresa and Ellie then struck across the woods together, Ellie prattling about everything she saw, and Theresa quite absorbed by her little charge. The others returned to the bed of the river. Bobbo, who had had scarcely any fishing, suddenly caught sight of another trout; the interest in the day's amusement was renewed; and so it came about that by the time they all met together again at Long Island not one of the whole party gave a thought to anything in the world but the fun of being on a desert island, and of getting their own dinner ready.

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CHAPTER VI.

LONG ISLAND was one of the largest of the little islands round which the river flowed. The river at this part was more considerable. In the winter-time it was too deep to be crossed except in a boat, and even now, at the end of the dry season, it required some care and no little agility to ford it on foot. The island was so thickly overgrown with trees and bushes that from the river banks it seemed to be only an impenetrable mass of foliage. But the children knew better. In the centre of the trees and evergreens was a little cleared spot, and on that little clearance their father had, many years ago, built a hut.

The difficulty of approach, and the delightful loneliness of the place, formed a great attraction for the children; but the charm of charms was this hut. Completely hidden as it was, approachable only by two little narrow openings in the bushes, never entered by a creature except the children themselves, there was a delicious mystery about it that heightened the pleasures of possession; and then, it was their very own, built by their father when he was a child like them, and begged for them by him from their uncle, who was scarcely even aware of its existence. It was their castle, their territory, to do with absolutely as they pleased.

To grown-up eyes their castle was one of the very queerest, most tumble-down little huts that ever was built, but there was no place in the world where the children more enjoyed playing. There was only one room. Its walls were built of stones of all shapes and sizes, more or less firmly cemented together with mud; a square opening on one side served as a window; but in the doorway there were still the remains of a door, which Murtagh and Bobbo had mended so that it could shut and be fastened on the inside.

On the side opposite to the window there was a chimney, and in one of the walls there was a kind of cupboard where Rosie and Winnie kept a wooden bowl, four or five broken plates, two cups, and an old knife. Besides these things they had a good-sized empty box, that they used as a table, and five flower-pots that served as chairs; also a piece of soap, an old scrubbing-brush, a lot of raw potatoes, and a broom which they had made for themselves.

The only drawback of it all was that this island was too far off. There was a shorter way by the road, but the children always came along the river-bed, and though the distance was really far less than they imagined, the high wooded banks, the desolate fields through which the river wound, made the course of it so lonely that they always felt as if they were on an expedition into the depths of a wild country.

This very seclusion, however, made it all the more suitable to their present purpose, and to-day their sense of proprietorship was perhaps more delightful than it had ever been before.

For the moment, however, the grand and important matter was to get dinner ready, and without delay they set to work to collect wood for the fire.

Then the hut had to be cleaned, for it was more than a month since they had last been here, and cobwebs and dust abounded; so while Rosie prepared to light the fire the boys went with the bowl and saucepan to bring up water from the river, Winnie swept out the hut, and to Theresa was entrusted the business of getting the fish ready for cooking. Ellie was sent to pick laurel leaves to strew the floor. "For," remarked Murtagh, "to-day's a grand festival day, and our floor must be strewed with rushes like the ancient Britons. I'll be lord of the castle, and, Winnie, you shall be lady."

"I don't know what to do with this fire, Murtagh!" exclaimed Rose. "The three matches we had left are every one of them damp; I can't strike them."

"What a sell if we can't have a fire at all!" ejaculated Bobbo. "What's to be done?"

"Go down to the mill, of course, and get some matches from one of the men," dictated Winnie, in her bright decided way.

"Well done, my Lady Winifreda! right as usual," exclaimed Murtagh. "Be off, you varlet!" he continued in a grandiloquent tone of voice, turning to Bobbo, "and——" He paused a moment to find proper words, but fine language running short, the end of his sentence collapsed miserably into: "Look sharp back again."

"Bring a dictionary next time," laughed Bobbo, as he started off to fetch the matches.

"I say, Win, supposing we were to be Lord and Lady Macbeth," suggested Murtagh, "and the others might be ancient Britons we've taken prisoners."

"Thank you!" retorted Winnie indignantly. "I'd rather not. And besides, Myrrh,"—this more doubtfully —"I don't *think* Macbeth was alive when the ancient Britons were."

"Yes, he was, somewhere about that time," replied Murtagh, decidedly. "Don't you remember in the theatre all the people called each other 'thou' and 'thy;' and besides, of course, I know he was. Don't you remember Bruce and Wallace, and King Alfred the Great, and Hengist and Horsa, and all those chaps?"

"Yes," said Winnie, "so I do, of course. Oh, well, I suppose it's all right; anyhow, it doesn't matter."

"I don't believe it's right," said Rosie, "because Macbeth was a Scotchman, and the ancient Britons were ancient Britons, so they couldn't have lived together."

"That's rubbish!" decided Murtagh; "because how do you know Macbeth wasn't a Scot and Pict? and every one knows they were with the ancient Britons."

"I don't think we'd better play games like that," replied Rosie, who had no answer ready, "because, you see, we have to do all the cooking and cleaning ourselves. We'd better be poor people living in a hut."

Rosie's plan was decided to be as good as another, and then scrubbing, sweeping, and dusting went on vigorously, till Bobbo came back from the mill bringing with him not only a whole box of matches but also a can of buttermilk, which the good-natured miller's wife had given him.

How the children enjoyed that cleaning! How they rubbed, and scrubbed, and splashed the water about! They forgot all about being hungry in the interest of sweeping, and dusting, and arranging. Any one might have supposed that they were the most orderly little mortals in existence.

Even Ellie had her share. With the skirt of her frock pinned back, and her little sleeves rolled up, she knelt upon the floor arranging laurel leaves, with the shiny sides uppermost, as though her very life depended on the completeness of the operation.

At last all began to look a little more clean and tidy, as Rose and Winnie observed with pride. The fire was lighted, the potatoes were boiling, the fish ready to cook, and now arose the great question: "How were the fish to be cooked?" The children had often seen Donnie cooking fish, but then it was always in a frying-pan, and they had no frying-pan. Murtagh was equal to the occasion. He thought he had heard somewhere that down at Killarney trout used to be grilled over a wood fire on a kind of gridiron of arbutus twigs; and there was a splendid arbutus tree on the island.

"All right," said Winnie; "I daresay it's as good a plan as another; anyhow, let's try."

The boys went out to cut the twigs, and she prepared a little wall of stones on either side of the fire, so that the sticks might be laid across from one to the other, and support the fish nicely over the red mass of glowing wood, without letting them get burned. Rosie and Theresa laid out upon the table the cracked cups and plates, the brown cake Donnie had given them, and Bobbo's can of buttermilk. Everything was ready except the trout. The children began to realize how hungry they were; and the boys coming quickly back with their bundles of rods, every one gathered round the fire, absorbed in the interest of watching the experiment of fish grilling.

Winnie's plan for making the gridiron answered perfectly, and in a minute or two six trout lay sputtering and fizzing side by side upon it.

"My golly goskins! doesn't it make one hungry to look at them?" cried Bobbo in delight.

Rosie looked almost solemn; she appealed anxiously to Winnie to know how long she thought they ought to take cooking.

"I don't know exactly," said Winnie. "We must just guess!" And so well did they guess that when, after what seemed a very long time, the six trout were all served up together in the flat wooden bowl, decorated by Murtagh with sprays of arbutus leaves and berries, the children decided that they had never in all their lives sat down to such a jolly dinner.

They were as hungry as hungry could be, and tired enough to be glad to sit down. The fish and brown cake were delicious; the hut was most cosy with its carpet of green leaves and its blazing fire, and even Theresa could not help being gay and light-hearted.

By the time dinner was over, however, the short October afternoon was beginning to grow dark, reminding them that, even taking the shortest way home by the road, they had some little distance to go, and nothing had yet been quite settled about Theresa.

"Now, listen, and I'll tell you what my plan is' said Murtagh, in answer to a question from Rosie. "This hut is a very nice place to live, and I vote Theresa stays here. There are three fish left, and a bit of cake. That'll do for her supper and breakfast. We can collect a lot of wood now before we go; then she can fasten the door inside and keep herself warm with having a jolly big fire all night; not a soul will ever know she's here, and to-morrow—"

"Well, but, Murtagh," interrupted Rosie, "we can't—!"

"Stop a minute, till you hear the end," said Murtagh, "I thought all about it on the way up here. To-morrow we must just make up our minds to ask old Plunkett something. It's not very nice," he added, deprecatingly, turning to Winnie, "but then, you know, it's not the same as if it was for ourselves. We'll just tell him all about it; how the rent was lost, and all; and then, though he is such a—what he is,—of course he'll let them off paying after an accident like that. And then, Theresa, we'll all go home with you when you go, and your mother'll be so awfully glad to see you, after thinking you're lost, that she won't think a word about anything except kissing and that sort of thing; and of course when the rent's all right your step-father won't touch you."

"What a splendid plan!" cried Winnie and Bobbo together, as Murtagh, proud of the completeness of his project, looked round for admiration. There was a reality and importance in the idea of keeping her all night that pleased them greatly.

The notion was by no means so agreeable to Theresa; but at the thought of going home the terror of her step-father came over her again. She dared not face him without the rent, the remembrance of her last beating was too fresh in her mind.

"I think I'd better drown myself and have done with it!" she exclaimed, relapsing into her former state of despair.

"What in the world should you drown yourself for?"

asked Winnie. "You have nothing to do except to stay here quite quietly and comfortably till to-morrow morning: then we 'll come up with the rent, and we 'll all go home to your house together: the night goes quite quickly, you know, when you 're asleep."

Winnie's words made the affair seem certainly much simpler. It was an easy way of getting the rent, and Theresa felt ashamed of her ingratitude.

"I 'm sure I ask yer pardon, every one of ye. It 's much too good ye are to me," she replied warmly. Then with a sudden doubt: "Ye 're sure ye 'll bring it up in the morning?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Bobbo and Winnie together, "of course we 'll come up the very first thing after we 've got it," said Murtagh. "You know he won 't actually give us two sovereigns, but he 'll say you needn't pay your rent; that 's just the same thing, you understand."

"But," suggested Rosie, who understood better what Theresa meant, "supposing he won't let them off paying."

"Oh, of course he 'll let them off!" returned the others confidently.

"Why," said Winnie, "just think, what 's two sovereigns in all the hundreds and hundreds of pounds of rent he has paid to him!"

"Why," added Murtagh, "he has more hundreds of pounds every year, I expect, than we have halfpennies, all five of us put together."

"So it would be just the same," continued Winnie, "as if some one asked us to give two halfpennies between us, and we would have to be pretty mean if we wouldn't do that."

"Yes," said Rosie, who never could understand anything the least bit like a sum, "then I think it 'll be all right. He couldn't possibly refuse that."

"I should rather think not!" answered Bobbo, while Winnie, jumping up, said they must set to work at once to collect firewood.

"There 's only one thing more," said Murtagh, whose first satisfaction with his own plan was a little bit damped by seeing that Theresa was not so enchanted as he had expected. "About your mother, Theresa, is that what you 're thinking about? Are you afraid she 'll be frightened at your not going home?"

"Oh, Murtagh, we can't help that!" said Winnie. "We must keep it all secret, or half the fun will be gone!"

Theresa replied dolefully that "She didn't know what her mother would do at all at all. She thought maybe it would kill her, she was that weak."

"I 'm sure it wont' kill her," said Bobbo, "and just think how jolly it 'll be to see her face when we take you back to-morrow."

"If once we let out the secret of the hut we 'll never have any peace here again," urged Winnie.

"Now do just listen to me," said Murtagh, suddenly illuminated by another brilliant idea. "Nobody 's going to let out the secret of the hut. This is what I vote. Of course we can't tell your mother all about you, Theresa, because it would never do to let anybody know where you are; but we might write something on a piece of paper, just to let her know you 're safe, and poke it under the cottage door the way the Fenians do their warnings about shooting people. We can do it on the way home, when it 's too dark for any one to see us."

"Oh, Murtagh!" cried Bobbo in delight. "How ever do things get into your head?"

Murtagh tried not to look too proud of himself, but he began to feel really elated at his own genius for arranging details.

"Who 's got a pencil?" he continued, producing a bit of dirty paper from his pocket.

None of them possessed such a thing; but a stick blackened in the fire and then dipped in buttermilk answered fairly well for a pen. It was found dreadfully difficult to write with; so Rose, who was the best scribe of the party, was directed to write only these words:

"Theresa is safe," — that being the very shortest message they could think of. Then Murtagh put the letter in his pocket, and they all set to work to collect firewood.

Poor Theresa was secretly terrified at the prospect of spending the night alone upon that out-of-the-way little island, but she dared not speak. The only alternative was to go home, and she was still more terrified when she thought of what awaited her there. There was nothing for it but to bear her miserable fortune as best she could. While the children made their preparations for departure she sat cowering by the fire, and to tell the truth, her unhappy face tried their patience not a little. They had no conception of the nervous terrors she was undergoing, and they thought that she really might look a little happier when they had arranged such a beautiful plan for setting everything right.

Before they went, however, Murtagh asked her good naturedly what was the matter, so she had at least the satisfaction of expressing her fears. The children tried to console and reassure her, but they could not succeed and at last, feeling that they were only wasting words they bade her "Good night," and picked their way across the river.

Left alone, Theresa dared not move even to bolt the door which the children had closed behind them, bu turning the skirt of her dress over her head, she sank down in the corner of the hut with her face to the wall, and quivering with fear lay still and listened.

Nothing came. Not a sound was to be heard but the murmuring of the water as it rippled swiftly over the stones, and before long the perfect stillness of her position produced its own effect; she fell into a short troubled sleep. But her dreams were of terrible things, and she awoke suddenly a few hours later convinced that she had heard something, she was too agitated to attempt to define what. She gave one scream, and then sitting up she held her breath and listened. A gentle wind had arisen, the branches of the trees were swaying backwards and forwards, and she imagined she heard a sound as of ghostly footsteps. The sound continued, but nothing approached: and at last, a desperate kind of curiosity overmastering every other emotion, Theresa determined to go to the window-opening and peep out.

Trembling greatly she crept across the hut. The moon was up now, and the first object that met her eyes was a great white shimmering thing that seemed to be coming towards her, waving its arms as it approached. She stood still a moment transfixed with fright; then a gust of wind rushed through the trees; the whole island seemed to shiver; two long white arms were raised as if to seize her, and she could bear it no longer. Shrieking at the top of her voice she fled blindly, she scarcely knew where, out of the hut down to the river's edge. The sight of the shining water recalled her just sufficiently to her senses to prevent her from attempting to cross the river; but still screaming she turned and rushed — right into the arms of the ghost itself, where she fell exhausted and terrified among the straggling branches of a tall laurel.

For a moment she lay shuddering with closed eyes; but presently, venturing to look around her, she found that the ghost had vanished; that the moon was shining peaceably on the white backs of the laurel leaves as they fluttered on the swaying branches; and after the first moment of astonishment, she began to understand that all her fright had been caused by nothing more nor less than a big bush.

Poor little Theresa! She had sense enough left to feel very small and very much ashamed of herself, so picking herself up from the ground she went quietly into the hut. This time she barricaded the window and bolted the door, then blowing the fire into a blaze she ate some supper, and lying down once more fell soon into a peaceable slumber.

The children meanwhile, on leaving her had trotted in the deepening gloom along the road till they came to the Dalys' cottage, a mere mud cabin standing back in a little garden from the roadside. But alas for Murtagh's plan of poking his bit of paper under the door! The door was wide open, and opposite to it, near the fire, a man stood smoking.

"What 's to be done now?" whispered Rose. "We 'd better go away; he 'll see us."

"Hold your tongue," returned Murtagh. "He can't see us because we 're out in the dark, but he 'll hear us if you don't mind."

Rose was silenced, and Murtagh stood a minute thinking what was best to do.

"We 'll hide in the ditch," whispered Winnie. "You wrap it round a stone, then shy it straight in and hide; don't run away."

Murtagh nodded in sign of approval; and while he looked for a stone the four others concealed themselves in the ditch. Standing a little on one side of the door he flung in his note. The children saw the little white thing fall at the man's feet. He started, looked round, then stooped and picked it up. As he opened it they heard him say something in a low thick voice. Then there was a shrill cry of "Peter, what is it?" He seemed to answer; took a great stick from the chimney corner, came to the door, and looked out. They heard the woman's voice say, "Oh, Peter, catch the villains!" and their hearts began to beat a little faster as they looked at his great stick.

To their intense relief, however, after a moment of apparent irresolution, he exclaimed with a drunken laugh, "May old Nick fly away with 'em. I 'm well rid of her." Then the door was shut to with a bang, and they all crept out of their hiding-places and scampered away home as fast as their legs would carry them, not feeling quite sure he wasn't after them till they were safe inside the house.

They rushed helter-skelter along the passages like a whirlwind, setting the doors banging behind them, till at the drawing-room door they were brought to a full stop by Adrienne, who hearing the noise came out to meet them.

"How late you are!" she said. "Are you not very cold? Come in here and warm yourselves while they are getting your tea ready."

The drawing-room behind was bright with lamp and firelight. In her white dress, her face a little flushed with bending over the fire, she seemed to the children almost like a being descended from some other world. Murtagh looked doubtfully at his muddy boots before he followed her into the drawing-room. The room smelt of flowers, a low chair was drawn up to the fire, and on a small table beside it was a bit of needlework and a china bowl full of ivy and late roses. The "mustiness" of the old drawing-room had somehow disappeared, as if by enchantment.

Adrienne knelt down upon the hearth-rug, and taking Ellie's two little hands in hers she rubbed them up and down to bring back the heat.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "It's very late; you must be tired and hungry."

"Don't!" burst out Murtagh, who was apparently fascinated by the contrast between Ellie's dirty little fingers and the hands in which they lay. "They are so beastly fishy; you'd better let them alone. Ellie can warm them herself at the fire."

"Ellie is so tired," said Ellie plaintively, leaning her little body against Adrienne. Adrienne sat down on the floor and took the child into her lap.

"Poor little thing!" she said, looking up at the others. "Have you been fishing? I think you have been rather too far for her."

"I should rather think we have been fishing," replied Bobbo, enthusiastically. "And we found something else besides fish; didn't we, Myrrh?"

An admonitory kick from Winnie, accompanied by a *sotto voce* "Hold your tongue, little donkey," warned him to be quiet, and Rosie hastily covered his abrupt silence by remarking: "We caught nine trout, and four of them were the very biggest I have ever seen."

Adrienne was all attention and interest, and without mentioning Theresa the children had plenty to tell. It was new to them to have a kind and intelligent listener waiting at home when they came in full of their adventures, and they thoroughly appreciated the advantage. Lolling in easy chairs by the fire, they were so warm and comfortable that they paid no attention to Peggy's announcement that tea was ready, and presently Mr. Blair's step was heard coming along the hall. Then Adrienne looked up quickly, and said with a little hesitation:

"Hadn't you better go and take your tea now? I think that is Uncle Blair, and you are so —— You are not quite dressed for the drawing-room."

The children started out of their chairs. Murtagh contented himself with one of his queer, significant glances, embracing the whole group that stood upon the hearth-rug. Rosie blushed, and explained that, "When we were with mamma we always dressed for the evening."

Adrienne, without answering, led sleepy little Ellie to the door. She was simply anxious to get them out of the room, judging rightly that their uncle would not be at all enchanted to find such a dirty little tribe in possession of all the easy-chairs. The children were quick to understand, and they did not require to be told twice. They vanished promptly through one door as their uncle entered by the other.

The school-room was cold, and as untidy as usual. The door was standing open, and the flame of the candle which lighted the tea-table flickered in the draught. As they surveyed it, and heard in the distance the drawing-room door shut behind them, the children had a vague shut-out sort of feeling.

"What a set of dirty vagabonds we do look," said Murtagh, shivering. "Shut the door, Bobbo; the candle's running down one side on to the table-cloth."

CHAPTER VII.

NEXT morning breakfast was half-finished when Brown entered the dining-room, and said that Mr. Plunkett was in the study, and wished to know if he could see Mr. Blair.

"Ask him to come in here, Brown," said Mr. Blair.

"Take a cup of tea, and tell me your business now, Plunkett," he said, as Mr. Plunkett was ushered in. "I have promised Mr. Dalrymple to be with him at ten to look at his moss agates, so I have not a moment to give you after breakfast."

"And I shall be gone to the outlying farms by the time you come back," returned Mr. Plunkett, without seating himself. "Well, sir, a most unpleasant event has occurred, and as I think you will be called upon to institute some inquiry, I consider it my duty to inform you of it without delay. Peter Daly has just been with me."

The children were suddenly startled into attention, and made violent attempts to look as though they didn't care.

"And it appears, from his confused account, that yesterday morning his step-daughter, Theresa Curran, aged thirteen, was sent to my house with the amount due for half a year's rent, two sovereigns, which she was to pay to me. The money was not paid yesterday, and the girl, it seems, has disappeared. Her mother became anxious yesterday afternoon, and despatched a little boy to make inquiries in the village. The girl had not been seen, and what gives the affair a serious aspect is this."

Here Mr. Plunkett, tucking his umbrella under his arm, drew out a pocket-book, and began to search among the papers contained in it. Then selecting one he laid it before Mr. Blair, and continued:

"Yesterday evening, after dark, this paper was mysteriously thrown into the cottage, and though, as you perceive, it is meant to be of a reassuring character, it points in my opinion to the conclusion that the girl has been forcibly abducted for the sake of the money in her possession."

Murtagh held his breath, and sat most unnaturally still for fear of betraying himself as he recognized his piece of paper. What in the world, he wondered, was the meaning of a "reassuring character?" Rosie blushed so violently that it was lucky for them no one was paying attention to their movements.

"You will observe," Mr. Plunkett went on, "that the writer is evidently a person of very little education; out of those three words two are wrongly spelt." Winnie's eyes sparkled with suppressed laughter, and she glanced at Rose as Mr. Plunkett made this remark.

"And," said Adrienne, who had risen, and was looking over her uncle's shoulder, "it has not even been written with a pen and ink."

The children began to lose all command of their countenances. They longed to be out of the room, but a sort of fascination kept them silent in their chairs. It did not occur to one of them that the simplest thing to do was to tell their story, and ask for the rent then and there.

"Everything, in fact," replied Mr. Plunkett, "tends to demonstrate that the offence has been perpetrated by members of the lowest class of society, and this invests the affair with a certain gravity. But I permit myself to hope that it may yet prove less serious than at first sight it appears."

"Go down to the cottage, Plunkett, if you have time before starting for the farms, and I should not be at all surprised if you find her sitting quietly by the fire," said Mr. Blair. "My countrymen have a wonderful aptitude for all that savors of romance."

"I have been down, sir," said Mr. Plunkett with something that was almost a smile, "and I fear the fact is incontestable that the girl and the rent have disappeared. The romance is not wanting. Mrs. Daly has got it into her head that a man, Patrick Foy by name, who has a grudge against her for marrying Daly, has killed the girl, and sent this letter in order to hinder any search being made till he has had time to leave the country."

Adrienne's eyes opened wide with mixed astonishment and incredulity.

"It is quite possible, Miss Blair," said Mr. Plunkett. "The folly and passion of these people is beyond all reasonable comprehension. I do not say that in this case I consider such a solution to be probable. But you perceive," he continued, turning to Mr. Blair, "that since the woman expresses such an opinion it complicates the affair, and renders it doubly advisable to put the matter at once into the hands of the police."

A sort of gasp from Bobbo made Mr. Plunkett turn his head; but Mr. Blair, suddenly remembering the moss agates, pushed out his chair at the moment, and recalled Mr. Plunkett's attention by saying with a smile:

"Well, well, Plunkett, you know I am one with you in your crusade against these barbarians; do whatever is necessary. And if it turns out to be serious," he added more gravely, "don't let any question of expense weigh with you. The poor girl must be found."

"I shall institute proceedings at once," replied Mr. Plunkett, as he walked with Mr. Blair to the door; "and if there is evidence to confirm the mother's notion we will, of course, have Pat Foy taken up."

The two gentlemen walked away down the passage, and the children were at last able to escape.

"I say," exclaimed Bobbo, "here 's a pretty go!"

"Hadn't we better say where she is at once?" said Rose anxiously; "somehow policemen —"

"You 'd better look out, Rose," said Murtagh mockingly; "you 'll be taken up before you know where you are and clapped into prison. You 're the eldest of us, you know."

But though Murtagh could not resist the temptation to laugh at Rose, he was serious enough when he turned to Winnie and asked:

"What 's to be done now? How shall we ask him for the rent?"

Winnie thought deeply for a minute or two; then she burst out ecstatically with: "Oh, Murtagh, wouldn't it be fun to keep her hidden, and have all the policemen and people searching, and Mr. Plunkett fidgeting and worrying, and taking ever so much trouble! It would pay him out so jolly, and pay out that policeman too for telling about me and Bobbo."

"No, no, Murtagh!" cried Rosie, "that would never do. We 'll be getting into an awful scrape."

"I don't think Theresa would think it much fun, Win," said Murtagh, shaking his head. "No; I think we 'd better get the rent. The thing is—I say!" he exclaimed, suddenly breaking off in the middle of his sentence, "isn't that old Plunkett himself on Black Shandy?"

He pointed as he spoke to the avenue, where some one on a black horse was trotting away from the house.

"It is so," replied Bobbo. "He 's off to the farms now, and the Lord knows when he 'll be back!"

It was useless to run after him, he was already much too far off; what was to be done? The children looked blankly at one another. Then Rose exclaimed vehemently: "Why didn't you ask him before he went, Murtagh? It was all your plan, and now what shall we do?"

"Ask him this evening instead," replied Winnie coolly, while Murtagh looked troubled. "Never mind, Myrrh, it 'll all come right in the end, because things always do. As we can't ask him now the first thing we had better do is just to get something from Donnie that will do for Theresa's dinner, and then go up and tell her."

"Poor Theresa!" said Murtagh, "she 'll be awfully disappointed."

Still Winnie was right. It was evidently the first thing to do; and having provided themselves with various scraps from the larder they started for the island. They went by the road; they had no heart to go up the river; and as they walked along they earnestly discussed the possibilities and probabilities of the police finding out all about it before to-morrow; for it had become evident that they must keep Theresa another night. It was more than ever impossible now for her to go home without the rent, and there was no knowing at what time Mr Plunkett would return from the farms.

They decided that they would wait about in the avenue to waylay him as he came back, and thus lose no time in making their request; but he was not likely to return till eight or nine o'clock, and it would be too late then to go up to Theresa. If it had not been for the police they would have thought very little of keeping her a night longer, but their notions about what police men might know and do were very vague, and they had in their secret hearts hazy visions of prison and a court of justice, which were too unpleasant to be talked about even to one another.

"I wish we 'd never had anything to do with her," sighed Rose.

"No," said Murtagh; "because you know, if she hadn't met us perhaps she 'd have gone home and been killed; so, of course, it 's better this way."

"Yes, but supposing we don't get the rent!" suggested Rose, dolefully.

"Oh, we must get that. Nobody could refuse it after thinking she 's dead and everything. If they don't find out before to-morrow it will be all right."

"I wish to goodness to-morrow was come then!" ejaculated Bobbo, who remembered how very unpleasant the policeman's hand had felt on his shoulder that evening on the garden-gate.

In this gloomy frame of mind they reached the island.

Theresa had recovered from her terrors of the night before, and now feared only her step-father.

When she heard the children's account of all that had happened she very nearly relapsed into the state of despair in which they had found her the day before. Rosie had secretly hoped that she would insist upon going home, but no such thought entered her mind. She only implored Murtagh to be sure and get the rent soon. "For, you know, sir, he 'll be madder than ever now after having all this botheration, and he wouldn't mind what he did."

It was impossible to comfort her, and notwithstanding Winnie's and Murtagh's confident assurances that everything would be settled on the morrow, the little party that dined on the island that day was very dreary and dismal.

The children stayed as long as they could to keep poor Theresa company, but towards four o'clock they thought it best to go and begin their watch for Mr. Plunkett; it was just possible that he might come home early.

"You mustn't expect us early to-morrow, Theresa," said Winnie; "on Sunday morning we can't get out before breakfast, because Donnie always comes and pomatums all our heads. Then we 're dressed for church; then there 's church; then there 's dinner—oh dear! I wish Sunday didn't come so often, we shan't be able to get up till the afternoon."

"Mornin' or evenin' it don't matter; I don't believe yez 'll ever be able to get the rent," replied Theresa, disconsolately; and in that desponding condition they were obliged to leave her.

They wandered about down in the park, listening anxiously for the sound of Black Shandy's hoofs. The wind was very cold, and towards six o'clock the evening closed in dark and wet. Their teeth chattered and their clothes were soon soaked with rain. Still it was no use going home till they had seen Mr. Plunkett. Theresa must not be disappointed a second time; so they marched patiently backwards and forwards to keep themselves as warm as might be, and held on bravely to their purpose.

At last there was a sound of footsteps. The children ran eagerly forward in the hope that it might be Mr. Plunkett for some reason returning on foot, but it turned out to be a laborer going home from his work.

"Whatever are ye doing out here in the rain?" he exclaimed in surprise.

"We're waiting for Mr. Plunkett," replied Murtagh "we want to speak to him."

"Ye won't speak to him to-night then," returned the man. "He came home in the doctor's trap hours ago. Haven't ye heard the news?"

"What news?" exclaimed Murtagh.

"The news o' the shooting. He was shot at from out o' the little wood across at the back o' Dolan's fields, an' he never was touched at all; only Black Shandy killed dead as a stone,—worse luck!"

The "worse luck" may have been meant as a lamentation for Black Shandy, but the tone in which it was uttered gave it an uncommonly different signification.

"Shot at!" exclaimed the children excitedly.

"What an awful lot of funny things are happening!" said Murtagh. "Who shot at him?"

"Them as thought we've had enough o' him and his ways, I s'pose," replied the man. "And that's not a few. Good-evening to yez; ye'd better be runnin' in out o' the rain."

"Yes, but look here," said Winnie. "Did they want to shoot him dead?"

"What d'ye suppose I know about it? Maybe it was only a bit o' fun, just to see whether they could hit a man or no when they tried," he replied, with a curious kind of laugh.

"Was he hurt? Were they caught?" inquired Bobbo.

"I don't know the rights of it, but there's nothing serious. Old Nick'll always take care of his own. He fell down with the horse, and they took him up, an' carried him into the farm; then the doctor was sent for, and after a bit the two o' them drove back here together. That 's all I know about it. It 's up at the house ye 'll hear the whole story. But my old woman 'll be looking out for me. Good-night to yez." And this time he moved off quickly.

"Isn't it lucky he wasn't killed!" said Rosie "We 'd never have been able to get the rent then."

"I wonder why they always shoot people," said Winnie. "Last year when Mr. Dalrymple was in Italy they shot Mr. Williams, and now they 've tried to shoot old Plunkett."

"Because they 're agents," replied Murtagh promptly. "And I don't exactly know what agents are, but it 's something very bad. They 're tyrants, and they oppress everybody. That man that was fishing with me and Pat O'Toole said Ireland would never be free till all the agents were killed."

"Are you quite *sure* old Plunkett 's an agent?" asked Bobbo with interest.

"Quite sure," replied Murtagh, "because they said so; and besides, can't we see he is ourselves? Isn't he always oppressing people?"

"Why doesn't the Queen banish them all out of Ireland?" said Winnie. "That 's what I 'd do if I were her."

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Bobbo, laughing, "wouldn't it be a jolly lark if she banished old Plunkett?"

"Yes; but, Murtagh," said Rosie, who generally kept one idea at a time steadily before her mind, "how are we going to get the rent? It 's all very fine talking, but we never seem to get one bit nearer to it."

"And we 're not likely to get a bit nearer to it to-night," said Murtagh with a sigh. "We 've just got to wait till to-morrow morning. It 's no use thinking about it. Here goes, Winnie; I 'll race you to the house."

But though he made the best of it he was greatly disheartened, and so too was Winnie. The plan had seemed so splendid at first, and now that it was to be carried out everything went wrong. They might pretend not to think of it; in reality it occupied all their thoughts, and when the house was reached they went very silently off to their own rooms. Bobbo and Rosie soon followed with Ellie, and while they groped their way into drier clothes the remarks exchanged across the little landing that separated the two rooms were of a decidedly doleful description.

They had some idea of staying up in their rooms till the dinner-bell rang; they did not feel in the mood to meet people and be asked questions about what they had been doing. But they had neither fires nor candles; they were cold and uncomfortable; and Murtagh soon remarked that he thought it was awful stuff staying up there in the cold.

"What 's the good of it? We 've often been in a row before, and, after all, people can't guess just by looking at us that we know where Theresa is."

"All right then," said Rosie; "Let 's go down. But don't let us seem to be cold or anything. Let 's look quite jolly, as if nothing had happened." And she ran down-stairs as she spoke, gaily talking and laughing.

The other two children admired her plan but they did not second it, and it was a very cold, hungry, dispirited-looking set of little people, who in another minute stood outside the school-room door.

"I hope to goodness the fire 's not out," said Murtagh, as he groped for the handle.

He opened the door as he spoke, and disclosed to the children's somewhat astonished eyes a school-room looking so different from their ordinary place of refuge that it was hardly to be recognized. Not only was a bright fire blazing in the grate, but the whole room was in perfect order. The crimson window-curtains were drawn; the tea-table was decorated with a bouquet of fresh flowers; the books had got into the bookcases; the music into the music-stand; the more comfortable and respectable of the arm-chairs were disposed within reach of the fire; the brown moreen sofa had been dragged from its corner to occupy the place of honor at one end of the hearth-rug; and Nessa herself, in her pretty evening dress, was sitting on the sofa reading.

An undefined sensation of comfort crept over the children, but with it the elder ones had an unpleasant consciousness that somehow their wildness seemed suddenly out of place. They didn't feel quite as if they were in their own school-room, and they hesitated an instant in the doorway, wondering half-uncomfortably what Nessa would say to them. They were very quickly at their ease, however, for she looked up brightly as they entered, and exclaimed:

"Oh, there you are! I am so glad. I was expecting the dinner-bell to ring every minute, and I wanted to be here when you arrived. What do you think of it?" She looked round the room as she spoke. "Peggy and I have been working the whole afternoon."

"Awfully jolly!" said Murtagh, taking up a position on the hearth-rug, and surveying the room with a satisfied expression.

"How pretty you have made it look!" said Rosie. "What did you do to it?"

"What did we not do?" said Nessa. "Peggy scrubbed and brushed and polished, and I dusted and arranged, and pushed the furniture about. First I was going to settle it a little by myself, and then Mrs. Donegan came up and she sent Peggy to help me."

"Well, I call this very jolly," said Winnie, who had thrown herself into a chair, and was looking round with a beaming countenance. "Doesn't it seem to you just a little bit like when we were at home, Murtagh?"

"Yes," said Murtagh, slowly. "Only it isn't papa, you know."

"That reminds me," said Nessa, as she rang the bell for tea. "Who are Cousin Jane and Emma, or Emily and Frankie? because I saw Uncle Blair for a minute at lunch time, and he said they were coming to stay here."

"Frankie coming!" exclaimed the children in delight.

"Oh, I am so glad!" continued Winnie. "He is such a dear little fellow, only he is so delicate; he is as old as Murtagh, really, but you wouldn't think he is more than seven or eight years old, and he's not a bit strong. Often we have to carry him just like Ellie; two of us put our hands together, you know."

"He's just the very best little fellow that ever was born," said Murtagh, warmly. "Now he really is good, if you like. I don't know how he manages; he never even wants to do anything — I mean things he oughtn't to. I suppose he was just born so."

"I wish he was coming alone," said Bobbo.

"Why?" asked Nessa.

"Oh!" replied Murtagh, "because Emma's a prig, and Cousin Jane — well, Cousin Jane *is* a nuisance. Isn't she now, Rosie?"

"Oh, yes," replied Rosie. "You know she laughs at us; and then about our clothes too, she always teases us because we're so funnily dressed, and that isn't our fault. Donnie and Mrs. Plunket settle all about that, and I'm sure I don't like being dressed as we are one bit; I often feel ashamed to go into church with all the funny colors we have to wear; and there's another thing, Emma hasn't half such pretty things as we used to have when we were with mamma!"

Rosie grew quite pink with indignation at the remembrance of what she had suffered by reason of Donnie's uneducated taste; and Nessa agreed that it was aggravating to have to wear clothes that one didn't like, and then be made fun of into the bargain.

"But tell me something," she continued; "are they all my cousins too?"

"Oh, yes," cried Winnie, "so they are! *Our* cousins; doesn't that sound nice?"

"What's funny," said Murtagh, "is about Cousin Jane. She's our cousin, and Emma and Frankie are our cousins too, because — Uncle William had a son. Oh, I never can remember that rigmarole; Rosie knows. Explain all about it, Rosie."

"You always begin wrong, Murtagh. That's why you can't remember," replied Rosie. "Uncle William was Uncle Blair's twin brother, and he's very, very old, you know. Then Uncle William died and had a son."

"Had a son and died, you mean," cried Murtagh, "and the son married cousin Jane, and had another son called 'little Frankie,' and then he died too, and——"

"That means Frankie died," interrupted Winnie; "you're as bad as Rosie, Murtagh!"

"Well, but I couldn't say it any other way," replied Murtagh. "If I said, then he died too and had a son called Frankie, that would mean he had Frankie after he died. Perhaps he did; I'm sure I don't know; he's been dead a very long time, that's all I know about it, and Frankie's the very jolliest little son any one could ever have! When's he coming?"

"I don't know," said Nessa; "not for some time I think. Uncle Blair said——" The dinner-bell ringing loudly, interrupted her sentence. "Uncle Blair said," she continued, rising, "that they were making a little sort of driving tour through the hills, and that they would end here."

"What a pity you have to go," said Rosie; "it is so nice talking."

"Would you like to come to the drawing-room after dinner?" said Nessa. "Uncle Blair does not come till nine o'clock."

"Don't you mind us coming?" asked Murtagh. "Emma always said we're such a nuisance!"

"Oh, no; indeed you are not to me!" replied Nessa, with an earnest warmth that made the children look up at her with pleased faces.

"When we've finished tea," said Rosie, as the door closed behind Nessa, "we might get some hot water and wash our hands and faces, don't you think, Murtagh?"

"All right!" said Murtagh, nodding his head.

And the result of their resolution was that when Nessa came out from dinner she found in the drawing-room four shiny little faces reflecting the lamplight, four tightly brushed heads, and four pairs of hands as beautifully clean as such weather-beaten little hands could be.

The children had, in fact, made themselves so clean that they felt half-ashamed, but Nessa appreciated their little attention.

"How nice you all look!" she said kindly, and then she sat down amongst them, and they spent a very happy hour chatting round the fire. They discussed their cousins' visit, and Mr. Plunkett's escape, and the children had lots to tell about the place and the people. It was so nice talking, as Rosie said, and they were very happy to be thus possessed of Nessa's undivided attention. So when bed-time came they ran gaily enough up their little staircase, and as they separated on the landing Murtagh exclaimed:

"You were quite right, Win, things always do come right in the end; only to-morrow morning and all our troubles 'll be over!"

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CHAPTER VIII.

MURTAGH woke next day with a glad feeling that something pleasant was to happen; and then, remembering what it was, he sprang out of bed with a shout of—"Hurrah, Bobbo, to-morrow has come, and we 'll be all right now!" Careering across the landing in his night-shirt, he woke Rosie and Winnie in order to remind them of the same fact, and they all rejoiced together, planning what they would say to Theresa's mother, and anticipating with delight how "awfully" pleased she would look when she knew that Theresa wasn't dead, and that the money was all right.

"I 'm very glad we met her, after all," reflected Murtagh, as he returned to his own room to put on some garments more suitable to the breakfast table. "Even if the police had got hold of us, it would have been something to have saved her, and this way it 's jolly."

Little Ellie understood enough of what was going on to know that the others were glad about something, so she looked happy and important when they met Nessa in the dining-room. Altogether they were as bright as they could be, and capered about, forgetting even to groan at the thought of being shut up in church for two whole hours.

They expected to see Mr. Plunkett at ten o'clock. It was his custom to walk through the greenhouses at that hour on Sunday mornings. But alas for their joyful expectations! Ten o'clock struck, and eleven too, and no Mr. Plunkett made his appearance.

Ballyboden fashion was to begin morning service at twelve o'clock, and at half-past eleven the carriage came to the door. Clearly, all hope of seeing Mr. Plunkett before church must be given up, and the mood in which the children started was anything but devotional.

It must be confessed that they were not agreeable companions in church that day. Never had the service seemed so long to them, and doubly long did they make it seem to Nessa. In vain she buried her face in her hands and tried to forget them. The proximity of four sturdy children, confined against their will, is not easily to be forgotten.

They meant to be quiet, but they yawned till the tears ran down their cheeks, and not only did they change their position every five minutes, but by a painful fatality they rarely succeeded in effecting the change without administering an unintentional but resounding kick to the woodwork of the old pew. At last came the final prayer, and Winnie went down on her knees with such alacrity that more than one respectable old lady turned her head, and seemed reproachfully to ask an explanation from Nessa. Oh! why are old pews constructed on the principles of a sounding-board?

But it was over; service and sermon had come to an end; and the small congregation poured out into the churchyard.

There the children learnt that Mr. Plunkett, more shaken than he had at first thought by the fall with Black Shandy, had been, this morning, unable to leave his bed. "It was likely," said the young doctor, who gave them the news, "that he would be confined to the house for several days."

Nessa was astonished at the faces of dismay with which the children received the information.

"Are you sure?" Rosie ventured to ask. "Are you sure he won't be able to get out for several days?"

"Well, I really can't tell you that, Miss Rose," replied the doctor. "But he's not very bad,—not very bad."

The doctor had a habit of laughing when he was nervous, and it made him very nervous to stand in the middle of the churchyard talking to Nessa, so he laughed a great deal as he answered Rosie.

"Giggling idiot!" muttered Murtagh, as he thrust his hands into his pockets and walked gloomily towards the carriage.

"Why can't he say something in earnest?" he added, turning, as he thought, to Winnie. But it was not Winnie; it was Nessa who was close behind him.

"Would you like to go round by the Red House, and inquire there how he is?" she suggested, feeling quite sorry for the children's needless anxiety.

Murtagh felt doubtful of the utility of that proceeding, but a nudge from Winnie, and an expressive glance from Rosie, made him accept the proposal. Winnie had conceived the bold design of seeing Mr. Plunkett in his own house, and of asking him without more delay; but, arrived at the Red House, she found that her hopes were vain.

"Mr. Plunkett was in his own room," Mrs. Plunkett said, "and did not know when he expected to leave it."

"Mightn't we go up and see him?" suggested Winnie undauntedly, but Mrs. Plunkett answered in horror: "My dear Winnie, I wouldn't let one of you inside his room for anything in the world. Why, he won't even have one of his own children in except Marion, and she's more like a mouse than a child."

So the notion had to be given up, and they drove away feeling more than ever puzzled as to what was to be done. Poor Theresa! They scarcely dared to think of going up to her with the news that she must wait again, and this time wait till they did not know when.

Their heads were so full of Theresa's troubles that dinner was little short of torment to them. They could not eat; they were longing only for the meal to be finished in order that they might get away and consult together. What, therefore, was their confusion, when towards the end of the second course Nessa innocently suggested that they should go together and pay a visit to the poor woman whose little girl had been lost.

"Uncle Blair said it would be kind of us," she said.

The children at first were so taken aback they scarcely knew what to say.

"We—we can't," replied Murtagh. "We have to go— I mean," he said, recovering himself, "we have something else to do."

"Look here, Murtagh, I don't see a bit of use all of us going," exclaimed Rosie, gaining a sort of desperate courage from Nessa's presence; "and I 'm not, for one."

"Do you mean," exclaimed Murtagh, astonished, "that you 're not coming up to—" He stopped short just in time, growing scarlet at the thought of how nearly he had betrayed himself.

Nessa looked at him in surprise, while Rosie answered stoutly: "No, I 'm not."

"Couldn't your business wait till to-morrow?" Nessa asked gently.

"No," said Murtagh, with a sort of shutting of himself up that made further questions impossible.

There was a minute's silence; then Nessa turned to Rosie and asked whether she knew the way to Mrs. Daly's cottage, and whether it would be too far for Ellie to walk.

"I tell you what," said Winnie presently, a vague idea that perhaps "something might turn up" at Mrs. Daly's, prompting her suggestion "if you 'll wait for us at the cottage we 'll come there after, because anyhow that 's the way we 'll come home. Rosie can go with you if she likes," she added, contemptuously.

So it was arranged; and dinner over, the children went away to their own rooms to prepare for their walk.

"What is to be done, Murtagh?" asked Rosie, as they mounted the little staircase. "Goodness knows when that stupid Mr. Plunkett will get well again! I think much the best plan is to give up the whole thing, and tell Mrs. Daly now all about Theresa. We can't possibly keep her there for ever and ever, and we shall be getting into an awful row, for the police always find things out."

"What is the good of talking like that, Rosie?" interrupted Winnie impatiently. "Just as if we didn't know as well as you that we 're getting into an awful row. You keep on telling us the same thing over and over again, as if that would help us out of it."

"Well, but I do tell you a way out of it," replied Rose.

"Yes, just like a sneaking woman's way," said Murtagh. "Of course, you 're never to stick to any one when it gets to be any trouble sticking to them."

"Well, I 'm sure I don't see much good sticking to people when you can't do any good by it," returned Rose, reddening; "and besides, you 're sure to let it all out before long, with the kind of things you say before other people."

"Come now, Rosie, you 're a great deal worse than Murtagh," remarked Bobbo, and a pitched battle of tongues was imminent, when Winnie again interrupted:

"Do hold your tongues, and let 's settle what 's to be done."

But talking about it was very little use, and soon Nessa's voice was heard at the bottom of the stairs calling out to know if Rosie and Ellie were ready.

Great indeed, as the children expected, was poor Theresa's trouble when she heard the news they brought; it was impossible to console her. Nothing but the terror of going home, which grew in proportion with the efforts made to save her from that dreaded contingency, kept her upon the island. She suffered, really, infinitely more from the fears and loneliness of her captivity than she would have suffered even from her step-father's anger. Her position on the island was indeed almost insupportable; but a sort of unreasoning shrinking from any new action, and, in spite of her desponding assurances to the contrary, a blind faith that somehow the children would make things all right in the end, kept her where she was. The first night had been the great difficulty, and that over she would now stay as long as the children could keep her.

In answer to her tears the children could say nothing but promise more confidently than ever to make it all right somehow, if only she would wait patiently; and after they had done their little best to comfort her they went away promising to come up the very first thing before breakfast and bring with them news of her mother.

The thought that they were going to see her mother reconciled her somewhat to their departure, but the hour they had spent with her had made them more than ever downspirited. They had exhausted all their courage in trying to comfort her, and the three little hearts were very heavy as they walked along the road that led to the cottage. It was Winnie as usual who brightened up a little at last.

"Never mind, Myrrh," she said, as they reached the cottage-door. "We 'll do it somehow, you know, if we hold out long enough." And she seemed so sure that the boys felt surer too.

They stopped on the threshold, hesitating to enter; but Nessa's voice within, speaking to Rose, emboldened them to lift the latch. The cottage was much like many another, but bare and neglected-looking. It felt cold, like an uninhabited place. A mud floor; at one end a cupboard; at the other a bed; a table, a couple of broken chairs; and in the smoke-stained fireplace a newly-lit fire trying to burn; that was what the children saw. Rose, at the fire, was stirring something in a saucepan; Nessa was sitting beside the bed with her back turned to the door. There seemed at first to be no one else in the cottage except little Ellie, who was leaning against Nessa's knees; but as the children's eyes became used to the obscurity they distinguished on the pillow the white, wasted face of a sick woman.

Rosie looked up full of importance as they entered.

"There you are!" she exclaimed in a half-whisper. "Oh, it was such a good thing we came. Do you know she had nothing to eat, and there was no fire, and the door was open, and the pig had got in, and the chickens were pecking her oatmeal, and oh! everything was so miserably uncomfortable; but we 've settled her bed, and now we 're making some gruel."

Nessa looked round at the sound of their entry Her face wore a saddened expression not usual to it.

"These are my little cousins," she said to Mrs. Daly; "but we did not know how ill you were when we agreed to come all together."

"They 're very welcome, Ma'am," replied the poor woman with a trace of cordial hospitality still left in her faint voice. "Ye 're kindly welcome, my dears; will yez please to sit down?"

"Thank you," said Murtagh, and they sat down at once round the fire. At home as they generally were in the cottages, they scarcely knew what to do with themselves in this one, and were glad to subside into silence. Nessa was hearing an account of the poor woman's illness, and from time to time the low indistinct sentences, interrupted by a constant cough, reached their ears.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" whispered Murtagh after a time.

"Oh, no," replied Rose. "We 've done everything. We made the room tidy, and we lit the fire and everything, and there was scarcely any wood, and she has hardly any covering on her bed, and there isn't a single thing to eat except a little oatmeal and some scraps of hard bread."

"What's in the saucepan?" asked Winnie.

"Gruel," replied Rosie. "Nessa settled it. It's got to be stirred all the time, and then she's going to toast the scraps of bread when the fire gets a little brighter."

After that the children said very little; but, sitting round the fire, they employed themselves with poking bits of wood into the blaze, and listened at first almost mechanically to what Mrs. Daly was saying.

She was speaking of her husband now, telling how he was very good to her when he was sober, but that when he got a sup of drink, it was like mad it made him. "He was as kind as a body could want yesterday morning," she said, "and went up to Mr. Plunkett's to tell about the child being gone an' all; but now I suppose it's in with some of his bad companions he is, for he's never been back since. And then, you see, Ma'am, it's not like as if Theresa was his own child. Of course, he hasn't the feelings like for her that a father might have, an' she makes him mad with her flighty ways, till what with the drink an' the anger he beats her sometimes till she can scarce stan' up on her legs.

"She lost the goat up on the mountains two months ago come Wednesday, an' deed he nearly murthered her entirely. She lay moanin' there on the straw all night fit to make your heart bleed. But for all that he's a very kind man; by nature I mean, Ma'am, you couldn't find a kinder. It's all for her good he thinks he's doing it, and with the drink—"

All this was said in detached sentences, interrupted often by a cough, or a few words from Nessa.

The children scarcely dared even to look at one another. They strained their ears to catch every word. Poor Theresa! it seemed to them that she might almost as well live with a wild beast as with such a step-father. No wonder she was afraid to come home.

But talking exhausted Mrs. Daly, and Nessa came soon to the fire to see if the gruel were ready. Then the bread had to be toasted, and a cup and plate and spoon had to be found and washed. But Nessa might have done nothing all her life except prepare gruel and toast, so quickly and deftly was it all made ready, and in a very few minutes Mrs. Daly, propped up in her bed, was partaking of the most comfortable meal she had tasted for days.

Nessa would not let her speak any more, but in order that she might not feel hurried over her gruel began to talk herself, and amuse the children as much as Mrs. Daly by an account of her journey from Brittany to Ballyboden.

She had such a perfectly simple way of talking, that, notwithstanding a certain Parisian bonnet which had been the object of Rosie's admiration all church time, she seemed no more out of place sitting on a broken chair, making conversation in poor Mrs. Daly's cabin, than she would have been in the most elegant of drawing rooms. Mrs. Daly was cheered by the pleasant chatter, and the children were quite sorry when the gruel was finished. But it was time to go home, and after asking if Mrs. Daly would like her to come again to-morrow, Nessa took her leave.

As they passed out of the gate a man evidently the worse for drink rolled in, and staggering up the little path noisily entered the cottage.

Nessa turned quite white.

"Are you afraid?" asked Bobbo.

"I—I can't bear people who drink," she replied, recovering herself.

"Mustn't it be dreadful to live with him?" said Rosie, as they walked on.

No one answered her. The children were inclined to be very silent. This life of Theresa's seemed to them something that could not be true. They had often been in and out of cottages; they had often seen men tipsy in the village; but they had never realized before what it meant; and it came upon them to-day like a dreadful new thing they had just discovered.

"How kind you are!" said Rosie gently, coming close to Nessa, after they had walked about half a mile "Mustn't Mrs. Daly be very glad we went?"

"Poor woman!" said Nessa, her eyes filling suddenly with tears. "She is very good. I wonder why God made us so happy."

"Yes," said Murtagh, who had been considering Rosie's words. "I think you're very kind; I think you like helping people."

"When I was little," replied Nessa, turning to him with a smile, and falling into the children's train of thought, "I had a nurse called Aimée. She used to be very unhappy because I could not go to her church, and on Sunday afternoons she always took me to try and help some one. She used to tell me that that was my way to heaven. Wasn't it a pretty thought?"

"I think you must have been quite a different little sort of girl from us," said Winnie. "We never thought about helping people, and those kind of things."

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CHAPTER IX.

NESSA next morning expressed her wish to go and see Mrs. Daly again, and Rosie again volunteered to accompany her.

"What's the use of my going to the island?" she said in answer to the other children's reproaches afterwards. I can't do Theresa a bit of good, and I hate going there. I hate to think of it. It makes me miserable. Soon the police 'll find out all about it; I know they will, and we 'll just be put in prison."

She went away as she spoke; she didn't want to talk about the affair. She would like to have forgotten it if she could, and she kept close to Nessa all day in order to prevent the others from having an opportunity of reminding her of it.

Her gloomy view depressed the other children not a little. They were already inclined to be low-spirited enough, and Rosie's conviction that the police would interfere before long affected them in spite of themselves, adding all the trouble of vague anxiety to their practical difficulties.

Winnie said, "she didn't believe ladies and gentlemen were ever put in prison, but she was not at all sure."

"Isn't it dreadful?" she said, waking up in the morning and thinking of it first thing. She meant by "it" all their troubles.

"Yes," said Murtagh; "and all day long too; I can't manage to forget it at all, but we 've just got to hold on, you know. We must be able to see old Plunkett soon now, and as for feeding her we can always manage that somehow. It 's no use thinking about the police. If they 're going to come why they 'll have to come, that 's all."

So they cheered each other as best they could till Winnie, suddenly brightening up, exclaimed: "Oh yes, Myrrh, and I 'd nearly forgotten. I thought of such a good plan last night in bed; something for Theresa to do while she has to stay there. You know her mother 's ill with compunction, or some name like that, and she ought to be kept very warm; so I thought supposing Theresa made her some flannel jackets while she 's up there. I know how to cut one out, and we can get the needles and thread and things out of Donnie's basket."

"Where are you going to get the flannel?" asked Murtagh laughing. "Because they 'll be rather queer jackets if they 're made of needles and thread."

"I 've thought of that too," replied Winnie triumphantly. "Come along;" and she jumped up from the staircase where she was sitting and danced into the boys' room.

"We 'll have two of your flannel shirts," she explained, as she went down on her knees before a great chest of drawers and began to pull at the handles of the linen drawer.

"Well done, Winnie, you are a brick; I never knew any one like you for thinking of things; exclaimed Murtagh heartily, helping her to get the drawer open. "Here, take these two new scarlet ones; they're the biggest; and besides, all the others are in rags. Now for the needles; you fetch them, and I'll run out with these for fear Donnie catches us. Won't she be in a jolly wax when she finds out they're gone?"

"Oh, she'll never miss them," replied Winnie; "and besides, we're only taking them for a poor person, so of course it's all right."

Right or wrong the shirts were speedily conveyed to the hut; and, busy with her work, Theresa was happier when the children left her for the night than she had been since the day of their meeting.

Thus another day went by. In vain the children hung round the Red House; Mr. Plunkett did not appear. The end of their adventures began to seem very indistinct. Supposing that Mr. Plunkett would not give them the rent when they did ask him? What was to be done then? It was a thought they refused to entertain, but in spite of themselves it crept from time to time into their minds, and it helped, with everything else, to make them unhappy. Sometimes they felt half-tempted to confide their trouble to Nessa, whose gentle ways were winning for her a warm place in their hearts, but there was a something of untamed shyness in their nature that made them shrink from exposing their secrets to any one. So they kept their perplexities to themselves, bearing them as best they could, and clinging still to the hope of getting the rent from Mr. Plunkett.

But the end of their adventure came upon them more suddenly than they expected.

On Wednesday morning they had for very idleness sauntered into the drawing-room where Nessa was engaged in rearranging the flowers, and, congregated round a little table by the window, they were watching her operations, when Donnie appeared in the doorway.

"I've brought you up the drop of soup I promised you, Miss Nessa, and a beautiful jelly it is," she exclaimed. "Ye might cut it with a knife. But the poor woman won't care much about jelly or soup this day, for it 's all out about the child. The police have gone up now to search the place."

The words fell like a bomb among the children.

"What!" exclaimed Murtagh. Rosie flushed to the roots of her hair, and stooped to pick up some fallen leaves. Winnie, with two bright red spots in her cheeks, started from her seat, while Donnie, without waiting for any questions, continued:

"I sent Peggy to the village this morning, and she 's just come running back an' told me all about it. The miller from the mill up there by Armaghbaeg came down this mornin', and he 'd never heard a word about it before at all. But directly he heard what all the people are saying he went straight off and gave his evidence at the police-office; how, last Friday night — the very day she was missing — he heard a most awful shrieking and screaming coming from somewhere about the island up there in the river. He and his wife heard it together. Most awful he says it was, an' made their blood run cold in the bed; and he said to his wife, 'Kitty,' says he, 'I 'd better be going to see what it is;' and she laid her hand on him, an' says she, ''Deed an' ye will not. If there 's base people about you 'd better stop an' take care o' them that belong to you.' So he stopped with her, and sure enough it must have been Theresa they heard. So one lot of the police are going to take up Pat Foy, and there 's more going up to search in the island and thereabouts. Anyways, that 's the story Peggy 's brought back with her."

"But they haven't found Theresa, then!" exclaimed Winnie, catching at the hope.

"Found her!" echoed Mrs. Donegan, shaking her head. "Poor child, it 's little they 'll ever find of her again! That 's my belief."

"Oh, we must go out!" exclaimed Winnie, unable any longer to hide her excitement. "Come along."

And before either Nessa or Donnie could ask them a question they were gone.

Too much excited to speak, they set off running quickly across the lawn and down the avenue. Once pausing for breath, Winnie said: "We shall get there first if they didn't start till Donnie told us!" But no one answered; they wanted all their breath for running.

They went down through the village, for the road was the shortest way. People were standing about in knots talking, but the children did not dare to ask if the police had started yet. As they passed the police-station they glanced hastily in, but naturally they saw nothing that could tell them whether they were or were not in time.

Bobbo felt his legs tremble as he thought that perhaps before evening he would be locked up there. He did not exactly know why it was such a dreadful thing to have hidden Theresa, but only felt that if the police found her something awful would happen to them. Without being the least bit cowardly the prospect seemed to him very unpleasant.

"Oh, Murtagh!" he exclaimed, with tears starting to his eyes, but Murtagh answered without looking round: "Come on; let's keep together," and quickened his own pace as he spoke.

Bobbo swallowed his tears, and after that the four pairs of legs went steadily, patter, patter, along the road, and not another word was spoken.

At each turning they expected to see the police in front of them. They strained their eyes to catch the first glimpse through the hedges of those dreaded dark coats, imagining from Donnie's account that at least a regiment would be employed in the search. Every tree-trunk indistinctly seen made their hearts beat faster, but on they went—running when they could; sometimes forced to walk for want of breath.

Turn after turn was passed. No police yet. At last the island was in sight, and the ground lay clear between them and it.

"In time!" exclaimed Murtagh.

But they were not sure yet; they might be altogether too late, and find the island empty. The thought lent wings to their feet. They dashed through the little wood that separated the river from the road, scrambled down the bank, crossed the river, and stood at last before the door of the hut. Theresa was there, sitting quietly working at the flannel jacket.

"Holy Virgin! what has happened?" she exclaimed at the sight of their excited faces. "Mr. Murtagh, Miss Winnie? What is it? Is me mother dead? Ah, tell me; will one of you tell me?"

But the relief of finding her safe was too great for words to be possible. Murtagh and Winnie stood trembling, while Rosie fairly burst into tears.

"Ah, what is it?" Will one of you tell me?" implored Theresa, wringing her hands. "It's me mother; I know it is! Oh, whatever did I ever come up here for? Let me go to her!" And she started up to go.

Murtagh shook his head, and stretched out his hand to prevent her.

"Good God!" cried Theresa, passionately. "Can't one of ye speak? Miss Rose, tell me; what is it?" And Rose thus appealed to dried her tears, and found words to tell that the police would be up there in a few minutes.

Winnie recovered herself, and added: "So we mustn't stay here. Now then, Murtagh, wake up, and think what we are to do next."

Murtagh took up the wooden bowl that stood half-full of water upon the table and drank; then quite himself again, he said:

"Yes, the first thing to be done is to get away from here, down the river and through the woods into one of the shrubberies; we shan't meet any one that way."

On hearing that her mother was as well as usual, Theresa was so relieved that she did not seem to think of anything else; but gathering up her work, she followed Murtagh and Winnie without question or objection.

Though Murtagh had said they would meet no one this way they did not feel safe, and hurried along in silence. Murtagh and Winnie were turning over plans in their heads of what was next to be done.

Bobbo, ashamed of his momentary weakness, began to recover his usual faith in Murtagh. But Rosie could find no comfort anywhere. Tears rolled over her cheeks as she followed the others, and she could think of nothing but the court-house as she had once seen it, with a grave-looking judge on the bench, policemen standing about, women crying, people staring and whispering. Only instead of the prisoner she had seen at the bar she imagined herself, and Murtagh, and Winnie, and Bobbo crowded in together, and her uncle and Nessa looking shocked, and Donnie talking about them. Then Mr. Plunkett would look so disagreeable, and Mrs. Plunkett too, and Cousin Jane would laugh at them, and perhaps they would be shut up in prison all their lives. One thing after another crowded into her mind, and the more she thought the more she cried. They must be found out some day soon.

"After all," said Bobbo, trying to feel brave in order to console her, "perhaps it isn't so bad. I expect Winnie and Murtagh will get us out of it somehow."

"They can't prevent the policemen taking us," returned Rose, dolefully. "I wish to goodness we'd never had anything to do with it."

"Even if we did get put in prison I believe Murtagh would get us out somehow," said Bobbo, trying hard to feel really sure of it in his heart.

"Don't talk such nonsense!" replied Rose crossly, "Murtagh's only a little boy." But she was somewhat consoled nevertheless, and by degrees stopped crying.

In the mean time they had left the river, and passing through a wood came now to the shrubbery where Winnie and Murtagh had arranged together that they might hide, and talk over plans, in a great Portuguese laurel.

The laurel was a very big one, trained into the shape of a pyramid, and there was plenty of room for the children to sit in the centre among the interlacing branches, completely hidden from outside by the close clustering leaves.

"Now," said Winnie, when they were all safely in, "have you thought of anything, Murtagh?"

"I don't exactly know," replied Murtagh slowly. "There's the mountains, but it would be awfully difficult to manage about her food. I don't see quite how we're to do it. Do you?"

"I won't do another single thing," interrupted Rose. "I told you long ago you ought to have told Mrs. Daly on Sunday. Then we'd never have got into all this dreadful scrape."

"Well, but, Rose," said Murtagh in a supernaturally gentle voice that he sometimes used when Rosie seemed to him quite unreasonable, "you know we couldn't tell on Sunday when we hadn't got the rent. How could we? It would have been worse to let her go home then than on Friday when we found her first."

"I don't know anything about the rent," returned Rose. "All I know is, it would have been much better if you'd done what I said; then we'd never have been so miserable."

"Don't talk like a fool!" ejaculated Winnie impatiently, while Murtagh said:

"But don't you see, Rose, that would have been as bad as murder, if we'd let her be killed."

"I don't see anything," answered Rose. "I only think this is the most dreadful thing we ever had, and I wish to goodness *anything* would happen, I'm so wretched. And I think it's very silly of you and Winnie ever doing it. You're only little children, and if people are going to be killed children can't prevent it."

Here Rose began to cry again and Murtagh turned

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to Winnie with a despairing — "What shall we do? It 's so awfully difficult to settle. I keep on thinking of plans, but —— Oh, dear! when will that tiresome Mr. Plunkett get well! Bobbo, did you go and ask about him this morning?"

"Yes; they said he was coming down-stairs this afternoon, but I asked when we 'd be able to see him again, and Biddy only grinned, and said, 'Maybe a month o' Sundays, and maybe next week.'"

"Oh dear!" sighed Winnie again, really for once in her life at her wit's end. "What can we do? Can you say any plan, Murtagh?"

"The only thing we can do," said Rose, suddenly stopping her tears, "is just to take Theresa back to Mrs. Daly's now, and tell her all about it. I 'm sure it 's much the best plan. We haven't got anywhere to put Theresa. She can't stay here in the laurel all night. Soon Donnie 'll be asking what we do with all the scraps she gives us, and I don't believe if we keep her here till doomsday that we 'll ever get the money from Mr. Plunkett."

"Oh, Mr. Murtagh!" exclaimed Theresa piteously, "ye won't be sending me home now without the rent."

Murtagh gave no answer but a puzzled sigh, while Rose continued: "It 's just every bit as unkind to Theresa keeping her here as it is to us. You can't do her one scrap of good. You 'll only make her stepfather angrier and angrier when she goes home for every day you keep her here — and there isn't a bit of sense keeping her here ever so long when there 's nothing to keep her for."

While Rose was speaking, Winnie, sitting on a low branch, stared up through the net-work of twigs at a bird's nest in the top of the trees, her whole attention seemingly absorbed by trying to throw laurel-berries into it. Only the impatient swinging movement of her feet told that she heard what Rose was saying.

As Murtagh was still silent Rose thought he was beginning to be convinced, and she continued in a gentler tone of voice:

"Don't you see, it really would be awfully silly of us if we went on keeping her here any more? It would take us years and years before we saved up two pounds out of our Saturday money, and we couldn't possibly hide her for years and years; now, could we? So, what is the good of keeping her any longer? If her step-father is really going to beat her so dreadfully he'll only do it worse for her staying away. He daren't kill her. If he does we'll tell the police about him; besides, I'm quite sure he won't. And then it is so dreadful hiding her. I'm quite certain the police will find out about it soon, and they'll come and take us and put us into prison, and perhaps it will be us will be killed." At the thought Rosie's tears began to flow again. It is so dreadful going to prison. I can't bear it; and if we could get her back to Mrs. Daly's now, before the police find out anything, then it would be all right."

Theresa had listened intently to every word, and now with a white face, and a wild, resolute look in her eyes, she stood up and said:

"I'm going home. Will ye let me pass, if ye please, Miss Rose?"

Rose eagerly stood on one side and held back the branches, but Winnie sprang from the seat and caught Theresa's dress, while Murtagh exclaimed:

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Theresa, "I'd rather go home. It don't matter what happens to the likes of me."

"It does matter," returned Murtagh vehemently. "It matters very, very much; you shan't go home."

"I don't want to be havin' yez taken to prison for a poor omadhaun like me," repeated Theresa, trying to tear her dress away from Winnie's firm hold.

"I don't care what you want; you shall stay where you are till we can do something to help you," returned Murtagh, pulling her into the centre of the bush again, while Winnie, turning to Rose, said with flashing eyes:

"I think you're a selfish coward, with your sneaking plans, and I wish with all my heart that you weren't my sister so I do."

"I don't believe you are our sister," added Murtagh, passionately. "If papa heard you he'd never speak to you again all the days of your life. And look here — if you do turn traitor, and let out one single word of what we do, I'll——" He stopped himself suddenly, and Theresa, frightened at the storm she seemed to have raised, put her hand on his arm with an imploring, "Mr. Murtagh, dear."

Rosie burst into tears again, and sobbed out that they were very unkind. After that no one spoke. For some minutes Rosie's stifled sobs were the only sound. Then Winnie said: "I have a plan, Murtagh. How do you think this would do?"

Murtagh looked up with a start. He had not been thinking of plans. He had been thinking what a little coward Rosie was, and that perhaps, after all, she couldn't help it. All girls were, except Winnie.

"Supposing," continued Winnie, "we were to hide her in one of the empty rooms of the house just for the present, and then go this afternoon and get to see Mr. Plunkett somehow, and get the rent?"

"Yes, that's the best," said Murtagh, heartily glad to seize any chance of bringing the affair to an end without deserting Theresa.

"Come then," said Winnie, making her way out of the bush. "Run on in front, Bobbo, and see if the road's clear."

"There now," said Bobbo, turning to Rose, "I think that's a good plan; don't you? It'll soon be all over now."

"It would be much better if they took her to Mrs. Daly," replied Rose sulkily, turning her back upon them all, and beginning to move slowly towards the house.

They managed, without meeting any one, to smuggle poor Theresa into an empty room, close to their own bed-rooms, and having done that they had next to summon up all their courage for the meeting with Mr. Plunkett. They could not think why they should feel so cowardly about it Often and often before they had been called up after some scrape to receive a rebuke, which, from Mr. Plunkett's lips, was sure to be sharp and galling. Sometimes he made them very angry, but they had never before felt nervous and trembled at the thought of an interview. Generally they went to him in a defiant, impudent mood, and talked as much as he did, but to-day matters were changed. They had to ask him for a favor. And, besides, those dreadful police seemed to make everything so different.

"What shall we say to him, Win?" asked Murtagh, sitting on the banisters of the stairs leading down from their rooms.

"I don't know exactly," said Winnie; "Rosie always talks to him best."

"I hate talking civilly to him," remarked Murtagh meditatively.

"Let Rosie do it," suggested Bobbo.

"I don't suppose she will," returned Murtagh, with a glance towards the girls' room where Rosie had remained. "Besides ——"

"She may just as well be of some use," said Winnie. "It's all because of her that we have to do it in such a hurry." Then raising her voice, she called — "Rosie!"

"Well?" returned Rosie from the bed-room.

Winnie waited for Rosie to come, but seeing that she did not, she called again — "Look here!"

"Well, what do you want?" returned Rosie, without moving.

"Come out here. We can't go shouting secrets all over the house."

"I don't want to have any secrets," replied Rosie.

"All right; don't then," answered Winnie.

Murtagh muttered — "Little brute," adding after a pause: "Which of us two is the best for talking?"

"I will, if you like," said Winnie. "After all, I don't care. He's an old nuisance, and it's no use bothering our heads what to say to him. Let's say whatever comes to our tongues."

"It would be a queer saying I'd say if I did that,' returned Murtagh. "However, let 's go and do whatever we 're going to do."

But Bobbo never could make up his mind to feel quite comfortable while a quarrel was going on between Rosie and Murtagh and Winnie.

"I 'll just see again if Rosie won't come," he said. "We had much better keep together."

So the others waited while he went back to Rosie's room.

In the mean time, though Rosie pretended not to care what Winnie and Murtagh thought of her, she really cared a great deal, and she was standing by the bedroom window crying, wishing she had never said anything about taking Theresa home. However, when Bobbo put his head in at the door and began — "I say, Rosie — " she hastily dried her eyes, and her answer "Well?" was as grumpy as ever. She didn't want to make them dislike her more, but she could not help feeling sulky the minute any one spoke to her. Bobbo did not pay any attention to that, but came into the room, and continued:

"I say, Ro, I wish you 'd come too; you blarney old Plunkett much better than any of us. You might just as well come."

"I don't want to go anywhere where I 'm not wanted," returned Rosie. "Murtagh and Winnie don't like me helping, so I 'd rather stay here."

To all Bobbo's persuasions she continued to give the same answer, till at last, thinking it was no use to stay any longer, he took hold of the handle of the door, saying: — "Don't be a donkey, Ro: Murtagh and Winnie are different, you know. They don't understand about people being afraid, and things. They think it 's so awfully sneaky to be afraid. You 'd much better come.

The door-handle had more effect than all Bobbo's eloquence, and Rosie moved away from the window as she answered again: "I don't want to go anywhere where I 'm not wanted."

"Don't be a duffer. Come along: you 'll get round old Plunkett better than any of us," replied Bobbo, seeing that he had gained his point, and turning round began to walk away.

"I 'm sure I want to help Theresa just as much as any one," said Rosie, as she followed him, "but Winnie and Murtagh don't like me interfering."

"I hope to goodness there will be no women in heaven," ejaculated Murtagh.

"Except me, Myrrh," said Winnie, and then they all went clattering down the staircase.

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CHAPTER X.

BUT as they reached *terra firma*—for taking into consideration the manner in which they habitually descended it that was scarcely a fit name for the staircase—the first bell rang for dinner, reminding them that it would be useless to go yet to the Red House. Mr. Plunkett would not be down-stairs till the afternoon.

They had nothing to give Theresa to eat, so Winnie and Bobbo went off to the garden to get her some apples, while Murtagh and Rosie returned to the schoolroom. There they found Nessa waiting anxiously for news.

During their absence the wildest reports had come up from the village.

Mrs. Donegan's story, though exaggerated of course in its details by the time it reached the children, was in part true. The miller had really given evidence which caused some policeman to be sent to search the island and the woods that fringed that part of the river. The child's disappearance had naturally caused a great sensation in the little place. It had been the topic of all conversation for several days. In many minds it had been vaguely connected with the attempt upon Mr. Plunkett's life, and if some of the inhabitants of the village were better informed as to the latter event, there was a very general impression that "there were terrible things going about."

The village mind was prepared for a tragic ending of the mystery, and now that it seemed on the point of being explained the excitement was considerable. A small crowd of women and boys trooped off in the same direction as the police, in order to have the first news of that "poor, blessed child," as Theresa was generally called, and those who remained behind would have thought it a sign of "rale want o' feelin'" to do any work.

Cabins were left unswept, dinners uncooked, pigs unfed. The whole population of the little village turned out into the street, and wondered, and conjectured, and shook their heads, and had a little drink at the shop at the corner just to keep up their spirits; till from one cause or another they had worked themselves into a state of mind in which accuracy was far from being one of the predominant qualities.

No wonder then that the most extraordinary stories were brought to Mrs. Donegan and Nessa. The discovery of the fire lighted in the island hut was to the police of little importance, since it was well known that the children spent much of their time there; but in the village it was speedily transformed into circumstantial evidence of the crime which every one had long ago decided to have been committed. Rumors and conjectures spread like wild-fire. In vain Mrs. Donegan and Nessa tried to find out the truth. Some said one thing and some another, and poor old Donnie so implicitly believed always the worst account, that Nessa grew thoroughly confused, and felt half-terrified at the barbarism of a place where every one seemed to think it quite natural and probable that a little girl should be carried off and murdered in order to annoy her mother.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come back!" she exclaimed, as Murtagh and Rosie entered the school-room. "Tell me what is true about Mrs. Daly's little girl. Your countrymen talk so wildly I really cannot understand them."

There was nothing wanting but this to complete the children's distress. They had come to the school-room thoroughly wearied out, and they really could not talk over the subject of all their troubles.

"If you can't understand Irishmen you can't understand me," replied Murtagh, throwing himself into an arm-chair.

His tone was almost rude. Nessa flushed a little, and turning to Rosie she continued:

"They told us such dreadful stories. They said—they said—the floor of the hut was covered with blood; but one said one thing and one another till it was not possible to understand. It is not true, is it? It cannot be true."

It was too much; Rosie could not bear it. Her only answer was a burst of tears.

"Oh, *Mon Dieu!*" said Nessa. "Her poor mother! Is it so bad as that? Is she really dead?"

"No more dead than I am," exclaimed Murtagh springing from the chair and walking impatiently to the window.

Rosie sobbed on, and Nessa now utterly bewildered put her arms round her and asked soothingly: "What is it that makes you cry?"

Rosie twisted herself out of Nessa's arms and made no answer. Nessa looked inquiringly towards Murtagh, but he was standing with his back turned to her staring out of the window, and almost counting every sob of Rosie's.

At last he turned and said quietly: "Don't you think you had better go up-stairs, Rose?"

Without stopping her tears Rosie went slowly out of the room, and they heard her sobs growing fainter and fainter as she walked away down the long passage.

"What is it?" asked Nessa half-timidly, as the sound of the last sob died away. "Is it something about the little girl, or have you—" She stopped, fearing to offend Murtagh by suggesting that they might have quarreled.

Poor Murtagh was at his wit's end. It was all bad enough as it was without these questions. He did not know what to do. To answer one was only to open the way to more. He felt that his secret was on the point of slipping from him, and he did not know how to keep it. In despair he turned round to his cousin with a mute pleading look that said more than words. There were no tears in his eyes. They were like the eyes of some dumb animal in pain; they did not ask for help—they seemed only to implore a little patience. Nessa had never seen a child look like that; she felt as though she were in the presence of a real trouble.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she exclaimed almost involuntarily, and then remembering that Murtagh was only a little fellow she put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Don't be so sad," she said.

Murtagh's heart bounded at her kindness. It was nearly five years since any one had caressed him so. He kissed her warmly back again, tears that had not been there before springing to his eyes. Then little Ellie ran into the school-room, and bounding into Nessa's arms imperiously commanded her to "tum to dinner, tum to dinner, betoz I is so hungry."

The luncheon-bell ringing loudly seconded her request, and they all moved away together to the dining-room.

Ellie was in high spirits, and Murtagh and Nessa devoted themselves to the little lady, till towards the middle of dinner Winnie and Bobbo came in from the garden.

"You are rather late," said Nessa.

"Yes," replied Winnie; "we were getting apples, and Bland nearly caught us, so we had to run round the long way. He did catch me, but I wriggled away from him. We brought the apples all safe," she added, turning to Murtagh.

"All right," said Murtagh shortly.

Winnie glanced quickly from him to Nessa, and then subsided into silence.

"I thought you ought not to take the apples," said Nessa.

"No," replied Bobbo, "but we had to; we wanted them."

The children were bad actors. Nessa wondered what was the matter, and wondered why none of them made the slightest allusion to the event which had apparently been so deeply interesting to them in the morning. It flashed across her that they were in some way connected with the disappearance of the little girl, but the idea seemed so improbable that she could scarcely accept it. She would not try to guess their secret; so she did for them what they could not do for themselves — she made conversation, and almost succeeded in covering their embarrassment.

After luncheon she was standing before the drawing-room fire, when the door opened and Murtagh ran in. To her surprise he threw his arms round her and kissed her. Then, blushing a little at what he had done, he said earnestly:

"You 're awfully kind. I 'll tell you about everything this evening," and without waiting for her to answer he ran away again.

His heart had been deeply touched by her sympathy in the morning, and when they had all started to go to the Red House he felt a sudden impulse to rush into the drawing-room and thank her. It was so quickly done that the others did not miss him. He joined them before they reached the door, and they slowly proceeded together across the park.

Rosie was with them, and having completely recovered from her fit of crying she was very anxious now to regain her place in Winnie's and Murtagh's esteem.

All the time that the others had been at dinner she had spent in thinking. She felt really sorry for having broken down and cried before Nessa. If Murtagh and

Winnie had been angry with her for that, she could have understood them much better. That did deserve their contempt. "It was very hard too," she thought, "just at the end, when they were going to get the rent and have all the happy part of taking Theresa home, that she should be separated from them, as it were, and lose her share in the pleasure." Above all, she could not bear to be thought cowardly and stupid. She liked people to be fond of her. The result of her thinking was that she determined to do her best to coax Mr. Plunkett to give them the rent. "For if I get the rent for them," she thought, "then they can't say I didn't do as much for Theresa as any one."

Consequently she was in one of her very pleasantest humors as she walked across the park, and Winnie and Murtagh wondered at her as she talked brightly about what she was going to say to Mr. Plunkett, sketched little scenes of Mrs. Daly's delight when Theresa was given back to her, and dwelt pleasantly upon how "jolly" they would all feel afterwards for having saved Theresa.

But though they wondered, they were certainly cheered, and felt far bolder when they arrived at the Red House than they had done for some time past.

Bland was coming out as they passed in at the garden gate. He scowled at Winnie and Bobbo, but Winnie shrugged her shoulders and looked up at him with such a bright laugh that he could scarcely help smiling as he hurried away, and growled out in a would-be surly voice:

"Ye 'll no do well to go in there."

Without heeding the warning they went round to the back-yard.

"We want to see Mr. Plunkett, please, Biddy," said Rose to the servant, who was hanging out clothes to dry.

"Faix it 's roses at Christmas-time we 'll be havin' soon," returned Biddy with a good-natured laugh. But the children were in no mood for joking, even at Mr. Plunkett's expense, so they walked soberly up to the door, while Rose asked what room he was in.

"Ye 're joking, Miss Rose," replied Biddy. "You wouldn't be goin' in to him in rale earnest. Why it's like a mad bull in a china shop he is to-day, with the polis comin' in an' out, and one thing an' another."

"But we must go in," said Murtagh. "We have some business that we must speak to him about."

"Sure, Mr. Murtagh, honey, is it going to be married ye are, and come for him to draw out the dockiments?" answered Biddy, laughing outright.

"Stop being a donkey, Biddy," said Winnie decidedly, "and tell us where he is."

"Where is he? By St. Patrick, if he was where I'd like him to be, it's the fardest end o' the pole from Biddy Connolly."

"Shut up your tomfoolery," said Bobbo impatiently, while Winnie exclaimed:

"Come along; let us go in without her."

But at that Biddy dropped the wet clothes she held into the basket, and ran to the doorway.

"Is it mad ye are, Miss Rose? Ye can't go in there. The missus 'd be out upon me in a minnit if I let yez in. Poor Missus, God bless her! the way she do slave after that old skinflint!"

"Do let us in," said Rose, coaxingly. "We've got business."

"I can't, Miss Rose. 'Deed I can not. You don't know the bother he'd kick up!"

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed Winnie, pushing past; "we can't help it; perhaps it'll bother him well again."

And so with a little more insistance, and more expostulations from Biddy, they made their way to the parlor and knocked at the door.

"Come in," called Mr. Plunkett.

"If ye will, ye will, an' I can't help yez," remarked Biddy, shaking her head compassionately as the children went into the room.

Mr. Plunkett was sitting in an arm-chair next the window, with his back turned to the door. There was no one else in the room, and having entered, the children stood hesitating for a moment near the door where he could not see them. Now that they were actually in his room their courage seemed all to have vanished. Their hearts were beating fast, they had a queer sensation in their throats, and not one of them could have spoken a word just then.

"Is that you, Marion?" inquired Mr. Plunkett, in a voice so gentle that the children could scarcely believe it was Mr. Plunkett who was speaking.

"No," faltered Rosie. Then plucking up courage she advanced towards his chair, and said in her most winning manner: "I hope you 're feeling better now. It was so unlucky, wasn't it, that you fell under poor Black Shandy?"

"Thank you; I am somewhat recovered," replied Mr. Plunkett in his usual severe voice, and the children no longer doubted their ears.

"Did it hurt you very much?" inquired Rosie.

"I suffered considerably."

"I 'm so sorry," said Rosie. "I do hate being hurt so." After a little pause she continued, the color mounting to her cheeks: "We have come to ask you a favor, and we do hope you 'll grant it." Here she paused again, blushing violently, and not quite knowing how to proceed. Murtagh, Winnie, and Bobbo came slowly into view, and Mr. Plunkett's face on seeing them did not look as though he were going to grant a favor.

"By what door did you come in?" he inquired sharply.

"We came in together by the back door," answered Winnie.

"I should like to know where Bridget was. These Irish servants are all alike careless and gossiping. I suppose her mind is too much taken up by the village mystery to allow her to pay attention to work."

"I 'd rather have one Irish than——" began Murtagh indignantly, his temper rising as usual in Mr. Plunkett's presence, but Winnie trod on his foot and reduced him to silence.

"We all know, sir, that you would rather anything which gives you an opportunity for contradiction," returned Mr. Plunkett severely. "Perhaps if you had had as much trouble as I have had about the disappearance of this girl, you would prefer not to have the additional one of seeing your servants abandon their work and leave your house open to whoever chooses to enter."

Winnie nudged Murtagh again as a hint to remain silent, but a sense of justice to Biddy made him answer:

"Biddy didn't run away from her work. She didn't want us to come in."

"And I suppose you thought my house was like your uncle 's garden, to be broken into at pleasure when you want something out of it. Bland has just been with me, and he tells me you have been taking apples again. If it were not for this unfortunate accident, I can assure you you should be punished as you deserve."

Murtagh made no answer. After a short silence Mr. Plunkett turned to Rosie and said: "Well, and what is the favor I am expected to grant?"

Poor Rosie felt that it was almost impossible now to ask it. She blushed and stammered: "I — I — at least — we — I mean — "

"Be so kind as to speak plainly. I do not understand what you are asking," said Mr. Plunkett.

Rosie looked as if she were going to cry, but Winnie in her clear voice said:

"We want you, please, to let Mrs. Daly off paying the two sovereigns she owes for her rent."

Now that it was out the children all breathed more freely. Rose recovered herself, and they stood waiting anxiously for Mr. Plunkett's reply.

He was surprised. He had expected them to ask something for themselves, and he was fully prepared to refuse, but this request astonished him so much that he paused. Though a hard man he was not at heart so disagreeable as the children imagined. To them he could not speak kindly, for he honestly believed them to be bad, but he spoke kindly to his own well-brought-up children, and he had in his way felt sorry for poor Mrs. Daly in her trouble.

For a moment he felt almost inclined to say yes. But then he considered that when the moment came for arranging such matters with Peter Daly there would be no necessity for the interference of the children, and he felt in no way disposed to give them a gratification.

The children stood like little statues while he thought. It seemed a good sign that he should take so long about it. At last the answer came:

"The paying of rent is a business transaction which does not in any way concern you. You may be quite sure that as your uncle's representative I will do whatever is right in the matter. And now, will you allow me to beg that at another time you will not force your way into my house when my servants tell you that it is contrary to my orders for any one to be admitted." And Mr. Plunkett taking up a newspaper began to read.

"But are you going to let her off paying?" inquired Winnie, standing on one foot and scratching up and down the stocking with the point of the other boot. "We want to know awfully badly."

"I shall do what I consider right after consulting with your uncle."

"Oh, I know Uncle Blair will say 'Give it to her,'" said Rosie; "and if you would say 'Yes' now, we would be so very much obliged. We have a most particular reason for wanting it."

"It will be quite time enough to consider such matters when something more certain is known of the fate of the poor woman's daughter," returned Mr. Plunkett.

"Oh, but," said Rose, not feeling quite sure how much to tell, "perhaps if it was quite certain about the money then there would be some more known about Theresa. You know," she added coaxingly, "there are such wonderful little fairies in the world that know all about everything."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Mr. Plunkett sitting up straight in his chair. "You can't mean to say!——" But there his feelings seemed to become too strong for words, and he paused, looking at Murtagh.

"We mean to say," said Rose, in a pleasant voice, rapidly determining that whatever happened she would not go away without letting him know that they had Theresa, "that if you'll give us the rent for Mrs. Daly perhaps we'll find Theresa and bring her back all safe and sound. Don't we, Murtagh?"

"But we mean to say, too," said Murtagh grimly, looking at Rose, "that we can't possibly find out anything about her, nor say a single word more, unless we do get the rent."

"This is too much!" exclaimed Mr. Plunkett. "Do you mean to tell me, you graceless young scoundrel, that your pranks are at the bottom of all the trouble and worry we have had? Do you mean to say that for your own amusement you have given me all this trouble with the police, turned a whole village upside down for a week, and nearly killed a poor suffering woman with anxiety for her lost child! I have no language to express my opinion of you, sir."

"My dear James!" exclaimed Mrs. Plunkett, coming into the room at that moment. "What is the matter? Rosie! Bobbo! Winnie! *and* Murtagh!" she added in astonishment. "How in the world did you get into this room? Did you send for them, James? What have they been doing? You know, dear, the doctors said you were not to be excited."

"It is of little use for doctors or for any one to lay down rules while such children as these are allowed to run wild," replied Mr. Plunkett.

"Though you have confessed it yourselves," he continued, turning to Murtagh, "I can scarcely believe that you can have behaved in a manner so totally devoid of all Christian feeling. But it is the old story: mischief is your god. So long as you can have the excitement of a bit of mischief you care nothing at all for the feelings of others; and I have no doubt it seems to you an excellent joke to persuade a dying woman's child to run away, and to embitter the last days of a poor mother's life.

"I suppose that between you, you have lost, or perhaps spent, the money entrusted to the child, and now you think that to take it out of your uncle's pocket will be an easy way of paying it back. It does not surprise me in you, Murtagh; but was there not one among you," he added, looking at the other three, "who could have remembered that you hold the position of young ladies and gentlemen?"

"You see you set us such a good example of forgetting what a gentleman is like, that we really couldn't be expected to remember," replied Murtagh, coolly.

"When you come to my house I must beg that you will not be insolent, sir," replied Mr. Plunkett angrily.

"Come along, Myrrh; don't be silly," said Winnie, moving towards the door. "How could he know why gentlemen do things?"

"Winnie," exclaimed Mrs. Plunkett, "how can you talk in such a way?"

"Mr. Plunkett shouldn't be so impertinent to Murtagh," returned Winnie, who had two hot red spots in her cheeks.

"I never saw such children in my life. I'm sure I pity that poor young girl who has to live amongst you," said Mrs. Plunkett, half crying. "To speak of my husband in such a manner!"

"Serve him right!" ejaculated Bobbo.

"You deserve, every one of you, to have your ears boxed," exclaimed Mrs. Plunkett, who was at no time famous for self-control.

"Catch us first," laughed Winnie. "Come along, Bobbo." She led the way down the passage as she spoke, and in another minute they were far on their way across the park, their cause hopelessly and irretrievably lost.

CHAPTER XI.

"I'LL tell you what," said Murtagh, when they were once more at home, and had fully realized that Mr. Plunkett had not only refused them the rent but what was more he knew that they were hiding Theresa, "I told Nessa I'd tell her everything this evening. You see, I thought it would be all right by then; and supposing we went down and told her now, and got her to help us."

The others were silent; it was rather a bold proposal.

"She's like us, you know," suggested Murtagh. "I think she'd understand about things."

Rosie looked anxiously towards Winnie, hoping she would say yes, but not venturing herself to give an opinion.

"All right," said Winnie, after considering a minute. "I think that's best. She might know of some plan."

"Let us go then," said Murtagh. "Whatever we do we ought to be quick about."

It was easy to be quick about getting to the drawing-room door, but there they paused. When they came to think about it, Theresa really was an awkward subject of conversation; and after the experience they had just had with Mr. Plunkett they began to feel doubtful as to what view Nessa might take of the matter.

However, something had to be done; so taking their courage in their two hands they somewhat shamefacedly entered the room. Nessa, with a big dictionary in her lap, was sitting reading Italian by the fire, and she paid little attention to their entry.

They none of them knew how to begin, but stood upon the hearth-rug alternately looking at her and glanc ing inquiringly at each other. The longer the silence lasted the more impossible did it seem to break it. At last Winnie began to poke the fire, and that gave Murtagh courage.

"I say," he began. But then Winnie stopped poking to listen to him, and the dead silence was too disconcerting; he stopped short as suddenly as he had begun.

"What were you going to say?" asked Nessa, raising her eyes from her book. And then in sudden surprise at the perturbed countenances of the children, she exclaimed, "Why, what is the matter?"

"Well," said Murtagh, plunging without further hesitation into his subject, "we don't know what to do, and we want to talk to you. We 've been thinking about you, and we thought, you know, that you 're different somehow. I mean we thought you 'd think true about things instead of only about 'Christian' and 'mischief,' and 'young ladies and gentlemen.' I mean," he continued, contracting his forehead as he puzzled himself with his own attempt to explain, "it 's so queer the way people are. If things are kind, or brave, or anything, then they talk about young ladies and gentlemen; and the things seem all wrong, somehow—but they aren't really wrong, you know, all the time; only it makes me get in such a rage."

"I—I don't think I quite understand," said Nessa, fairly bewildered in her attempt to follow the meaning of his somewhat complicated preamble.

"Well, I mean—" said Murtagh. "We 've got Theresa, you know."

"You have what?" exclaimed Nessa, more puzzled than ever. His last words were plain enough, certainly, but they could not possibly mean what they seemed to mean. In vain she tried to see the smallest connection between them and the foregoing sentences.

"I beg your pardon. It 's very stupid of me," she said, apologetically; "but I really don't understand. It must be some English I don't know."

"No, no," said Murtagh. "You'll be able to under stand quite well. We 'll tell you how it happened, and then you 'll see. It was the day after you came. We were going up the river fishing; and Ellie couldn't—Win, you tell it; you 'll tell it better than me."

The children's embarrassment was completely gone now. They were only eager for Nessa to know all about it; and beginning at the beginning Winnie, with various interruptions from the others, told the whole story to the end.

Nessa's amazement, when she began to understand the drift of what they had to tell her, was unbounded. She did not know children ever did things like that. But before the end of the story her warmest sympathies were enlisted in their cause.

"You see," said Murtagh, when Winnie had described the way in which Mr. Plunkett had received their request, "we never thought about anything except that horrible step-father, and how nice it would be taking her back with the rent and all. And you remember the way Mrs. Daly talked about her husband on Sunday. Well, of course, that only made us think of it more. But Mr. Plunkett always manages to make everything seem wicked, and he makes me wicked in reality. The very feel of him in the air makes me angry before he speaks a word. I do hate him so!"

"Yes," said Nessa, looking troubled. "It is wicked to hate. I wish you would not feel like that, because then you are wrong too. And listen," she continued, turning her face toward Murtagh, who had thrown himself on the floor beside her; "I am sure the reason why he is so disagreeable is just only because he does not understand."

"He never does understand," returned Murtagh vehemently. "He doesn't choose to understand; he likes to be unjust!"

With a sudden impulsive movement she threw her arms round his neck. "Don't be like that," she said in her sweet pleading voice; "please don't. It is such a pity."

Murtagh had drawn himself up in his anger. At Nessa's caress his muscles relaxed, his face lightened with a slow trembling. Then, possessing himself of one of her hands, he kissed it without a word.

It was not in the least like a child's answer. For the second time that day Nessa felt as though Murtagh were somehow older than she. She looked at him with a sort of surprise, but the strange expression was already gone, and the face he turned up to her was full of affectionate gratitude.

"And now," she said, "let us count our resources." She drew a little green leather purse from her pocket as she spoke, and emptied its contents on to the open dictionary. "But I have not enough," she added, looking up almost apologetically. "How much money have you?"

"I 've got a shilling," said Rosie.

"I 've only twopence," said Winnie; "Bobbo, and I have been saving up. He has a penny half-penny."

"I haven't any," said Murtagh, shaking his head.

Little Ellie, who had been sitting on the rug looking exceedingly solemn while the children talked, gazed attentively at Nessa, and the money, and then got up and trotted silently out of the room.

"Well, that is all," said Nessa, after searching in each compartment of her purse; "we must do the best we can with it."

"Yes, but," said Murtagh, "We don't want to take your money. It isn't right you should give it. We couldn't promise your money. We meant to get it."

"You see it is a good thing to have an elder sister," replied Nessa, glancing up from her occupation of counting the coins spread out upon the pages of the dictionary.

"And besides, Murtagh," said Rosie, who felt that Murtagh was not to be trusted, "if you won't take Theresa home without the rent it really is the only way. I don't like taking your money either," she added, coloring and turning toward Nessa, "but what can we do? We haven't got any except one and twopence halfpenny."

"I should think you very unkind," said Nessa seriously, speaking to Murtagh, "if you did not take what I have. But," she added, "even with your money we have not enough."

"Well then," exclaimed Murtagh decidedly, "it is no use for us to take yours. We can't take her back without the whole rent. We must just hide her up in the mountains, and I expect Uncle Blair will make Mr. Plunkett let them off the rent when he knows that will bring Theresa back. We can hide her in some safe place, and nobody on earth can make us say where she is if we don't choose."

"Oh, Murtagh!" exclaimed Nessa, "you don't know what you are saying. It would be enough to kill Mrs. Daly. Even if you had not a sou you must take Theresa back at once. You don't know—you don't know—" Nessa's voice was choked, she could not finish her sentence. She had witnessed the grief of the patient desolate mother. Only yesterday the poor woman had said to her with quiet hopelessness: "Yes, Ma'am, I'm dying—thank God."

And they could talk of prolonging the pain.

"You don't know," she said, raising her head and drying the tears that had suddenly overflowed. "You meant to be kind, and you did do all you could. But—Mrs. Daly loves Theresa."

Her voice was trembling again, and she did not trust herself to say any more. Murtagh was looking at her in consternation. Then all they had done had been a mistake; there was no doubting the meaning of those last few words. His eyes sought Winnie's. Poor children, they were sorely disappointed!

But Nessa had hardly finished speaking when the door was pushed open, and little Ellie rushed into the room shaking a tin money-box up and down.

"Ellie's dold money! Ellie's dold money!" she exclaimed triumphantly. Her little face was beaming with excitement, and running up to Murtagh she thrust the money-box into his hands.

"Ellie 'll dive the money; det it out with the scissors," she said. Then ecstatically squeezing herself together she rubbed her hands up and down her cheeks till her face was burning red.

"Dear little Ellie!" exclaimed Nessa, astonished at the sudden outburst of excitement and taking the child in her arms, while Murtagh tried with a pair of scissors to extract the money from the box.

"It's her half-sovereign that Cousin Jane gave her last Christmas," exclaimed Winnie. "So it is; Donnie's kept it for her all this time."

"It's Ellie's own dold money," said Ellie, with her arms tight round Nessa's neck.

In the pleasure of seeing the rent completed, Murtagh forgot his scruples about Nessa's money.

"Three cheers for Ellie," he cried, tossing the money-box up to the ceiling as a glittering half-sovereign fell out upon the table. "It's just right now."

"We want one halfpenny more," said practical Winnie.

"Ellie's dot a ha'penny too," exclaimed the child in delight, wriggling herself down on the floor, "out in the darden."

"That's a rum place for halfpennies," remarked Bobbo.

"It's planted," said Ellie. "For seed," she added gravely, seeing the others inclined to smile.

The children all began to laugh, and Rosie exclaimed: "You little silly! you don't suppose money grows from seed, do you?"

Instantly Ellie was transformed back again into her usual quiet little self.

"Me thought ha'pennies might," she murmured, and hid away behind Nessa.

"I think it is true," said Nessa. "I think we do plant money for seed, sometimes. Only not exactly in the garden," she added, smiling as she kissed little Ellie.

And now, there lay the much-wished-for two pounds on the table, and the children were free to take Theresa home that minute. A load was off their minds, and the relief was so great that at first they could hardly realize it, but they did not feel happy as they had expected to feel.

There was no pleasure in looking forward to the meeting with Mrs. Daly. Murtagh felt rather ashamed than otherwise, and wished it was over. Everything had happened so differently from their plans. They did not know how it was; it did not seem to be their fault; but glad as they were to be so near the end of their troubles, it was without any feeling of pleasurable excitement that they gathered the money and went to set Theresa free.

Theresa, however, felt nothing but the wildest delight. Bobbo first announced to her the good news. He burst into the room where she was hidden, exclaiming, "We 've got it, Theresa; we 've got it." Then Rose followed rattling the money in her hands, and Theresa, who could hardly believe the news at first, saw that it was really true.

"Ah, Mr. Murtagh, Miss Winnie dear, God bless ye, God bless yez all!" she exclaimed, springing from the corner where she had been sitting, and seizing hold of Murtagh's hands. Half-laughing, half-crying with excitement, she tried to get out some more words of thanks, but could say nothing. Then exclaiming, "Glory be to God," she suddenly sank down upon her knees and burst into tears.

But they were tears of gladness and were over quickly. Drying her eyes with her apron she sprang up again and ran towards the door, saying delightedly, "My mother! Let's run down to her quick. Ah sure, won't she be glad to see us!"

The children followed with pleased faces, and as they trooped down the stairs Theresa poured out expressions of her thanks and of her delight at getting home.

"Ah, I 'll never be able to thank yez right. Let us go on a bit quicker," she was exclaiming, when they rushed round a corner of the passage and nearly knocked Mrs.

Donegan off her legs as she was coming slowly along, carrying a cup of tea for Nessa.

"By all the blessed saints and martyrs, and is that you, Theresa Curran?" she exclaimed, fixing her eyes upon Theresa, and forgetting in her astonishment to pick up the teacup, which had been dashed to pieces on the floor. "Riz up from the dead, with the police after you, and the master himself payin' your expenses, an' all."

"Take a good look at her, Donnie, while you 're about it. It 'll be a long time before you see any one else risen up from the dead, with the police after them, and the master paying their expenses," laughed Murtagh, whose spirits were rapidly rising under the influence of Theresa's joy.

Theresa, blushing and trying not to laugh, curtsied at Mrs. Donegan's notice of her, and the children, without waiting for more, carried her off like a whirlwind towards the drawing-room.

Donnie followed as close upon their heels as she could. "Miss Nessa, did ye ever hear of such a thing?" she exclaimed, as the children rushing in presented Theresa with an unceremonious "Here she is."

Theresa stood blushing with such a supremely happy face, and the children around her were all so radiant, that the infection spread to Nessa, who laughed like a child as she answered in the words Donnie was so fond of using, "They 're wonderful children."

"What is it at all?" inquired Mrs. Donegan. "Did they find her when the police couldn't?"

"That 's it exactly, Donnie," laughed Winnie. "Come along, Nessa. Where 's your hat? Don't stand palavering with Donnie or we shan't get to Mrs. Daly's till midnight."

"Tum 'long," urged Ellie, pulling Nessa's hand.

"It 's wonderful we are *en*tirely," said Murtagh, turning round for a last mock at Donnie as they went out of the room.

"Mr. Launcelot's to the backbone," muttered Donnie, lifting up her hands. She stood a minute or two after she was left alone, murmuring, "Well, it 's wonderful to think of," and then hurried away to the kitchen to tell the great piece of news that Theresa was found, that the children were cleverer than all the police, and found her themselves in no time when once they went to look for her.

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CHAPTER XII.

THERESA and Mrs. Donegan had between them put the children into the brightest of moods, and as they danced across the lawn they completely forgot all the wrong side of their adventure and their misgivings about meeting Mrs. Daly.

At the gates some of the lodge-keeper's children were playing. The instant they saw Theresa, one ran in shouting the news to his mother, and the others set off like deer to the village calling out to every one they met that the young ladies and gentlemen were coming down the road bringing Theresa along with them.

"What a nuisance!" said Rosie. "Now we shan't be the first to tell Mrs. Daly."

"Pat! Mick! Biddy!" shouted Bobbo. "Come back, will you!" But it was no use; they were too far down the road to pay any attention.

"Perhaps that is better," said Nessa. "She is too weak for a great surprise."

But Nessa was not prepared for the other effect of having the news spread before them.

Every one, man, woman, and child, who heard it, first refused to believe, and then were told to go and see for themselves; so by the time Theresa and her escort reached the village they were surrounded by a miscellaneous crowd, the members of which were not all quite sober, were all wanting to get near Theresa to see if she were there in "real earnest," and were all asking questions as to how she was found, and where she was found, and "what happened her."

With each addition to their party the children's spirits rose higher and higher. They were determined not to satisfy any one's curiosity, and to every question they responded with some bit of nonsense. They knew every one's private history, and bandied jokes with each new comer till their progress along the road was accompanied by continuous roars of laughter interspersed with a sort of hail of questions.

"Ah, now tell us! How was it ye outwitted the polis an' found her when they couldn't?" called one.

"Outwitted the police," returned Winnie. "Have you come to your age, Kitty, and don't know yet that the police have got no wits to put out?"

"Thrue for ye, Miss Winnie, asthore; it's me own wits are out to ask such a question!"

"But where did yez find her?" asked another, pushing Kitty aside.

"Why where the police didn't find her, of course!" laughed Murtagh.

"Then it's plenty o' places ye had to choose from; but tell us now, Mr. Murtagh, honey, how did yez find her? Was she half-dead or how was she?"

"Not half-dead at all, but dead and a half, and pining for a sight of you, Mrs. Malachy," replied Murtagh, turning to the village schoolmistress.

"Sure, Theresa! Is it yer ownself come back?" cried a woman from the edge of the crowd. "Tell out now; who was it spirited ye away?"

"The fairies — the good people," cried Rose and Winnie together, while Theresa blushed and laughed.

"Ah, Mr. Murtagh, my jewel, give over jokin' and tell us where ye found her," called Kitty again, having elbowed her way back close to them.

"Wouldn't any one know you're a woman, Kitty?" began Murtagh, when a man on the other side of him interrupted in a heavy voice:

"Don't tell her a word, Mr. Murtagh; she's the curiousest woman in the place."

"And you'd like me to tell you instead," said Murtagh, looking up with a merry twinkle at the light blue stupid eyes. "Ah, well, if you want to know, it was Miss Winnie's bright eyes did the business."

"But however was it she did it?" asked the man.

"For shame, Phelim. Were you born on April fool's day not to know that?" laughed Murtagh. "You'd better go home and find out."

"Go to Shuna Toolin an' get her to teach ye," called out several voices amid fresh derisive laughter.

"Tell us round here, Master Bobbo, honey, that niver asked a question," cried a woman persuasively, divining justly that she would get most out of Bobbo.

"Well, it was up there by the river, if you want to know so badly," returned Bobbo.

"Up by the river! Why sure that's where the police looked and niver found a bit of her!" cried several voices together.

"Don't be insulting us comparing us to those omadhauns of police, that don't know a whisky press when they see one," called Murtagh.

Roars of laughter interspersed with "Arrah whisht, Mr. Murtagh," greeted that remark. Then some one cried out, "Three cheers for the young ladies and gentlemen," and Nessa's bewildered ears were deafened with three loud "Hurrahs."

"Three groans for the polis!" called another.

In the midst of the hearty groan with which he responded to the invitation, Murtagh caught sight of Nessa trying to lift little Ellie out of the crush.

"Carry Miss Ellie, will you, Pat Molony?" he called out, laughing as he spoke, at the quaint expression of Nessa's face. Thrusting out two dirty kindly arms from behind her, Pat Molony lifted Ellie over Nessa's head, saying gallantly: "It's not fit for the likes o' you, Miss, to be carrying childer. It's more like a white lily ye are;" and when Nessa looked round to thank him she saw Ellie contentedly sitting on his shoulder, with one arm round his dirty neck.

In this fashion, joking and laughing, they passed through the village and out on the road close to Mrs. Daly's cabin. Then some ran on to tell her they were coming, and Theresa and the children, refusing to answer any more questions, made their way through the crowd, and hurried forward. At the garden-gate Theresa passed them all, and rushed into the cottage alone.

Murtagh and Winnie were close behind her. They overheard a smothered cry, then—"Oh, my darlint! my darlint! is it you yourself?" and there was something in the intensity of the voice that made them suddenly stop short. The laughter died from their faces, and they stood looking at each other. A strange awe had fallen upon them. The noisy laughing crowd seemed far away; they heard only the kisses that were being exchanged in the dark cottage, and children as they were, they understood suddenly something of what the mother had suffered.

Through all their adventure they had never given one thought to her, till Nessa's emotion this afternoon had first opened their eyes. They had forgotten so many things, and now as they stood looking wistfully into each other's faces they were filled with remorse. What was it that had been wrong in all this? Something had they felt, and yet it had seemed right. Neither of them spoke, they only looked at one another, but they knew that the same thought filled both their minds.

They did not think of entering the cottage, and the crowd seeing them stand still, stood still too. A fear ran through it that they were too late,—that Mrs. Daly had died without seeing her daughter. The noise and laughter were suddenly hushed. Some one said, "What's happened?" Faces were turned anxiously towards the door. It was as though a spell had fallen upon them, and for a minute, while Winnie and Murtagh stood gazing into each other's eyes, there was a dead silence.

They neither of them ever forgot that strange hush and the bewildering thoughts that filled it.

The silence was broken by Mrs. Daly's voice in the cottage saying: "An' where are they till I thank them?"

Then Theresa ran to the door to call them in, and the crowd seeing that all was right, broke into speech again and trooped into the cottage after the children.

Mrs. Daly was sitting up in the bed; Theresa knelt beside her with her arms around her neck.

"I'll never be able to thank yez right," said Mrs. Daly, stretching out two thin hands towards the children; "but if ye care for a poor woman's blessing may it follow ye to the end of your days. And may none of ye evei feel the hundredth part of the sorra' I've had since she's been gone from me."

"True for ye, Mrs. Daly. May they have peace and happiness all the days of their life for the good turn they've done to the poor this day," cried some from behind with a ring of feeling in their voices.

The children stood by the bedside blushing.

"But we didn't," said Murtagh to Mrs. Daly—"we didn't do what you think; I mean, we didn't find her to-day. We knew where she was; we helped her to hide from her step-father when she lost the rent; but she's got it now." He spoke with difficulty, and he was glad to have got it all out.

Mrs. Daly hardly seemed to pay attention to the sense of the words. She had got her arms round Theresa and was thinking only of her.

"It's all one," she answered. "Ye've brought hei back alive, an' I thought she was dead."

A few minutes more and the children had left the cottage. The crowd stayed behind anxious to hear at last Theresa's story, and they walked soberly along the road with Nessa.

"Isn't it delightful," said Rosie, "to think that it's all so well over?"

"Berry belightful," returned Ellie so emphatically that she made them all laugh. But then she wanted to know—"What for all the people were laughin'?" and while Rose explained, the other children walked on silently. They were not inclined to talk about it yet.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN the mean time Mr. Blair had heard from Mr. Plunkett an account of the children's behavior which was certainly not flattering to them, and at dinner that evening he spoke about it to Nessa.

"Mr. Plunkett does not know how to manage people," she said, after she had explained the story from the children's point of view. "It is a pity."

"Ah!" said her uncle, amused at the quaint gravity with which she announced her opinion.

"I do not like him," she continued. "He is hard. He is bad for the children."

"What! have you been thinking about it?" said her uncle, smiling. "If you have I suppose you must be right, but you astonish me. I thought he was wonderfully good for the children."

"No," said Nessa, "because he does not understand them, and he does not like them. He makes them angry. Listen," she continued; "I think it would be very difficult for these children to be good. They have but two things. Mr. Plunkett thinks that all they do is wrong, and the others—the other people—think that all is right. It is very bad for them. It is bad for them to be so much scolded, and it is bad for them to be so much flattered."

"So Plunkett thinks all is wrong, does he?" asked Mr. Blair.

"Yes," said Nessa; "he does not see anything but the wrong, and he scolds the children, oh, in such a very disagreeable way. He stirs up all their wicked thoughts; he makes them proud and angry; and then I think they *like* to do what he does not want."

"But, my dear child, that is the only rule I have ever been able to discover for children's behavior. They always like to do what I don't want," said her uncle. "Why do they always bang the doors? Why do they always shout under my windows? Why do they get up at six o'clock in the morning and clatter up and down the passage when I am enjoying my soundest sleep? Answer me all these questions if you can, little advocate."

"They bang the doors because they are always in a hurry," said Nessa, smiling. "And they shout because they are happy. And they get up early—— Well, the birds get up early too."

"Well, well, well," replied her uncle, laughing, "if you will have it your own way I suppose you must. But you must learn to appreciate Plunkett's other qualities. He is a splendid fellow; he saves me more trouble than twenty other men would do in his place."

"Perhaps he is very useful," said Nessa, willing always to be polite. "But he is not interesting," she added decidedly.

"He is most interesting to me," returned Mr. Blair, still laughing. "I have twenty pounds now for every ten I used to have, and he has succeeded in making the cottagers round about keep roofs on their houses, and conform to a few other customs of civilization, unpicturesque perhaps, but very desirable. He has done it at the risk of his life too," he continued, in a more serious tone. "More than one of the men about here would think it a praiseworthy action to shoot him from behind a hedge some dark night. Plunkett knows it, and after all, little lady, your martyrs of the middle ages did not do so very much more than persevere in their duty when they knew it might cost them their life."

"Yes, that is brave," said Nessa, looking up.

Her uncle's words made Mr. Plunkett's character appear to her in a new light, but they gave her an unpleasant creeping sensation. She was beginning to think that Ireland was a very unsafe place to live in.

"Well," said her uncle, as they rose to leave the dining room, "are you convinced now of Plunkett's excellent qualities?"

"Yes," replied Nessa, coming back to her former train of thought, "but——"

"But what?"

"I do not think I could like him; he is not kind."

"Ah, you true woman!" replied Mr. Blair, as he held the door open for her. "You won't acknowledge yourself beaten; but ask his little daughter Marion if he is not kind."

Instead of going to the drawing-room Nessa went straight to the school-room to join the children, but she found it empty; the children were out, Peggy told her. Intending to wait for them a little while she went to the window and threw it open to see what the night was like. The air was warm for an autumn evening, and very still. No sound to be heard but the rippling of the river. In the dark blue sky above shone the full moon; and the park, gently undulating, lay gleaming in its silvery light. Deep black shadows from the trees fell here and there, but not a breath stirred the branches. It seemed as though the world were all asleep, and the river singing a lullaby.

Nessa rested her arms on the window-sill, and stayed there looking out. The events of the day had made her wonderfully thoughtful, and this moonlit park was more in keeping with her mood than the warm, bright drawing-room. After a while, however, her thoughts slid gradually into fancies, and she found herself dreamingly gazing out, imagining how fairies might haunt those shadowy hollows and come out from among the trees to dance on the silvered slopes.

The flowing of the stream seemed to interweave itself with her fancies, and make music for mystic dancing. She was not thinking; the beauty of the night, the stillness, the soft cadence of the water, played upon her mind and made sweet dreamy pictures there, till at last with the fairy music mixed something more tangible — sounds that seemed to be actually coming nearer.

Surely those last notes were real. They swelled by degrees into a plaintive melody that floated for a moment on the still air, then sunk again. The water rippled on over its stony bed, and Nessa looking at the dark trees and moonlit grass, half-wondered if the music had really been or if she had only imagined it.

Presently the sweet notes rose again, clearer this time and fuller, gaining strength as they went on. Then a fresh young voice began to sing strange words that Nessa did not understand, but that seemed to blend in harmony with the stream, and the night, and her fancies. The music came nearer and nearer; another voice joined the first, but after a while both music and voices died away. A faint reflection, as it were, of the sounds lingered in the air; and Nessa, listening for more, heard them soon again coming from a different direction. They seemed in some mysterious way to be behind her. She wondered how that could be, and then became aware that they were in the house, crossing the hall and coming down the passage. The music was plain enough now,—a violin; and a girl's and a boy's voice together were singing a wild Irish song.

"Can it be the children?" thought Nessa, as she turned away from the window to listen. Soon her doubt was set at rest; the door of the school-room slowly opened, and Winnie entered singing, followed by Murtagh, who was playing the violin and singing too.

They did not see Nessa, who had withdrawn into the shadow of the curtain, but stood still together in a broad strip of moonlight near the table singing as though their whole souls were in the song. Winnie's head was a little thrown back, her face looked white, her eyes unnaturally large and dark in the strange light. Murtagh had bent his head to one side over the violin, and his face was in shadow.

Nessa stood entranced watching the weird little figures.

But as their voices rose to a sort of strange sweet wail that formed the refrain of their song, Murtagh's hand slipped. A sudden shriek of wrong notes was the result; both the children stopped singing, and he impatiently flung the violin on the table, exclaiming: "That 's always the way when I 'm just getting it best."

"There 's a string gone, and that 'll be sixpence to save up before we can have another singing night," remarked Winnie, ruefully, as a slight snap from the violin announced the mischief that had been done.

Nessa advanced from the window, and suggested that perhaps the string would be long enough to be used again.

"Are you there?" exclaimed Winnie, taking up the violin. "No; it 's the same string that broke last time. Myrrh," she continued, "I do wish you wouldn't pitch the violin about so; couldn't you remember to give it to me every time instead of throwing it down?"

"Especially," remarked Rosie, who had come in with Bobbo, "when it 's all your fault. If you practised every day the way you promised mamma, you 'd never make those horrid squeaks."

"Shut up!" said Murtagh, flinging himself down on the hearth-rug beside the chair on which Nessa had seated herself.

Winnie hovered about watching Nessa's useless endeavors to make a short string long enough, and finally settled down also upon the hearth-rug; while Rosie, after surveying them for a moment, remarked that she was going to bed, and went away up-stairs.

"You 'll be throwing it in the river by mistake some of these nights, Murtagh," said Bobbo, drawing near to inspect the violin, "and that 'll be an awful nuisance."

"Don't bother him!" said Winnie. "We are so tired."

Bobbo made no answer, but sat down on the floor beside her.

"I 'm sick and tired of everything," exclaimed Murtagh presently. "Everything 's wrong and wrong and wrong whatever you do; I think I 'd like to be nice and quietly dead, then things wouldn't be all so puzzling."

"I 'm so tired now," said Winnie, wearily laying her head on a footstool, "that I think I 'd like to be dead or anything where you don't feel."

"Poor children!" said Nessa, "you are tired out."

"It isn't being tired I mind," said Murtagh, wearily; "but it 's so dreadfully difficult all about what 's right and what 's wrong. I cannot understand about it, and I wish — yes, I really do wish I was dead."

"But that is not brave," said Nessa gently. "I do not think we need be afraid of our lives," she continued, after a moment's silence, "because there is always so much good that we don't know of. I felt afraid when I had to come here, and now I am very happy after all."

"Yes, but," said Murtagh, "it isn't like that; only it does puzzle me so about the wrong sides of things. We were so wretched all the week trying to keep Theresa, and we couldn't laugh at anything, and when we woke up in the morning we thought about her the first thing. But then we thought we ought to keep her; we thought Rosie was talking nonsense. Well, afterwards, all of a sudden, we find out we were all wrong somehow!"

"Oh no," said Nessa, "you were not all wrong. How can you say that when you were so kind and so brave?"

Murtagh's face brightened for a moment, but then he said: "Yes; but Winnie and I have been thinking, and it came right in the end because you helped us; but we didn't bring it right. We only made Mrs. Daly miserable, and Theresa miserable, and ourselves miserable. We wouldn't desert her because we always thought it was beastly mean deserting people, and all the time Rosie was right; and it is very funny, being brave is worse than being cowardly."

"Ah," said Nessa, "but you are mistaking the part that was wrong. If you had been older you would not have hidden Theresa in the island at all, because you would have known all the trouble it would bring; you would have come at once to Uncle Blair. But then you couldn't help not being older, and when you had hidden her there, much the best thing you could do was to be brave. If you had taken her back at first you would never have got the money."

The explanation satisfied Murtagh for a moment, but then he said: "It wasn't our keeping her that got the money. If you hadn't been here we could never have got it. And supposing it had done what Mr. Plunkett said; supposing it had killed Mrs. Daly?"

But Nessa was not accustomed to explain things, and she felt that she was growing puzzled. She was not puzzled a bit by the fact — of course she knew that it was better to be brave than to be cowardly, better to try to help people when they are in trouble than to leave them to take care of themselves — but by the difficulty of putting her conviction into words.

"I don't know how to explain," she said at last; "but I know I love you for doing as you did."

Bobbo sitting nearest her gave her hand a fervent squeeze. It was new and pleasant to them to be loved.

"And wait one moment," she continued; "I think now I can explain a little too. You know we are not perfect, and the thing we have to do is to try and be as good as we can. We are quite sure to make mistakes, but I think we ought to be brave enough to go on trying and trying to the end; and then God *is* kind; he will let us have done most good by the time we have to stop. Don't you think so?"

"I think if you were always there we should always do most good," said Murtagh warmly, kneeling beside her.

And Nessa, changing her manner, laughed and kissed his forehead, saying: "Ah, you mad fellow, if I were always with you I would not let you do so many foolish things, and you would wish me very far away."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE children's waking on the following day was a very happy one. For the last week the remembrance of Theresa had fallen like a cloud upon them the instant they opened their eyes, but this morning they sprang with light hearts from their beds. That trouble was over and gone, and all the world looked bright in consequence. It was the day for Indian letters too, the day that they all loved best in the fortnight, for there were generally two good letters, one from papa and one from mamma, and papa's letters especially were almost like stories, only better. Out of doors the sun shone, the wind was warm, birds were singing among the reddening leaves, the river sparkled and flashed invitingly. It was more like a day in August than October, and the children resolved to enjoy it.

They danced with joyous faces into the dining-room to breakfast; they seemed created to be happy. Their uncle was not there, and the post-bag lying by his plate was locked. Murtagh might smell it, shake it, try to lift up the flap and peep as much as he pleased, his anxiety for a letter had to remain unsatisfied till Mr. Blair made his appearance. But then, could anything be more delightful?—a nice fat letter from papa for Murtagh, and one from mamma for Rosie.

No sooner was Murtagh's handed to him than he bounded with it out of the window. There Nessa saw him kiss it, turn head over heels three or four times on the grass, and then tear away at full speed round the corner of the house. Breakfast was nearly over when he returned, with a radiant face, and handed the letter to Winnie to read, remarking, "It's awfully nice."

"Yes; and isn't it nice that you are to have half a sovereign for your birthday?" said Rosie, giving him her letter.

"Oh, yes, awfully jolly. Papa says I am to have one from Mr. Plunkett," he added, turning to his uncle. "Does he tell you? he says he will."

"Yes," said Mr. Blair. "When is your birthday?"

"Wednesday week," replied Murtagh. "Come along out," he exclaimed, after devoting himself during an interval of about three minutes to his breakfast, "and let us read what the pretty mother says. You come too, Nessa, and you shall hear papa's letter also. We'll go to the big chestnut-tree; that's where we always read their letters aloud." And taking a bit of bread to supplement his hasty meal, he rose from the table and led the way out.

"We get up in the branches," said Rosie, when a few minutes later they were walking along out of doors, "and sometimes we pretend it's a sort of church."

"Only, last letter day," said Winnie, "we pretended we were a family of squirrels, and mamma's letter was a dear little white dove flown over the seas to tell us not to steal nuts and apples from the other squirrels. Of course, you know, she didn't say anything about them really, but she often does tell us to be good, and that's the same as not stealing is for squirrels. It's such fun pretending, and then we put little pieces in the letters."

"And then we went off to Nut Wood to get ourselves some instead of stealing," said Bobbo, "and when Winnie was up in the very top branch of the bull's-eye tree, Mr. Plunkett came past and saw her, and called out, 'What are you stealing those nuts for?'"

"And I thought about him being a squirrel, and running up and down the trees whisking his tail," interrupted Winnie, "and I laughed so much I tumbled off the tree, and gave myself such a whack I haven't quite got well yet."

"And another day we were just Irish kings and queens, the way we generally are, and papa's letter was some river fairies come down to warn us about some scoundrelly English taking our chief palace—that 's the island, you know. We rushed up there at once, and lo and behold! when we got there what do you think we found? That old piggamy, Mr. Plunkett, had chopped down our watch-tower, a splendid old oak-tree that had its branches blasted with lightning, the only one on the island. So the English had been there true enough."

They chattered on in this fashion till the big chestnut tree was reached,—a splendid old tree, with gnarled trunk and spreading branches. In a moment the children were in it, looking indeed not unlike a family of squirrels as they scrambled about and peeped at Nessa through the clusters of pointed leaves.

Nessa had never been in a tree in her life, but the children seemed to look upon it as so easy and natural a place of habitation, that she merrily accepted their invitation to mount.

"Will it be difficult to get up there?" she asked, indicating a place about four or five feet from the ground where the trunk spread out into three great branches.

"Oh no, no," exclaimed the children, "as easy as possible. Here, take hold of our hands, and set your foot on that sort of bump lower down, then you can walk up like going up stairs."

They stretched out their hands and in a moment Nessa was seated in the tree.

"Shamrocks and Shillelaghs! There 's Mr. Plunkett out again, and he 's seen you, Nessa," cried Winnie in delight, "and oh, he does look so jolly shocked!"

Nessa was enchanted with her novel position. "Never mind Mr. Plunkett," she said gaily. "Let us read the letters now."

"What shall we be to-day?" said Winnie. "Nessa couldn't be a squirrel exactly, you know."

"We 'll be Irish kings and queens," said Murtagh, "and Nessa will be a stranger who has brought us these letters from a far-away king."

"Oh yes," said Winnie. "And you'll live with us for a while, and afterwards we'll discover you're an Irish princess who was stolen away when she was a baby. Now then, Myrrh!"

Nessa settled herself into her place with a little pleased laugh. It was much pleasanter to be out of doors this morning than in the drawing-room. Murtagh read the letters aloud. The children had read them five or six times already, but they listened with the greatest delight, laughing again at the little jokes, and telling Nessa to "just listen to this!" when any particularly nice part was coming.

"Now," said Murtagh, when the letters were quite finished, "come along with us, and we'll show you our dominions."

"Yes," said Rosie. "It's too bad; she's been here a whole week, and we've never shown her our islands, nor nut-wood, nor the mushroom-field, nor the mountains."

"I'll tell you what, Myrrh," exclaimed Winnie, struck by a sudden inspiration, "we'll have a picnic up the mountains on your birthday. What do you think of that?"

"Yes," said Murtagh, "and oh, Win, a plan has just come into my head. Such a beauty! I'll tell you presently."

"Is it a secret?" asked Rosie.

"Yes. But I'll tell you too, by-and-by. Oh, it is so jolly; you'll go cracky when you hear it." And being unable to turn head over heels Murtagh relieved his feelings by springing to the ground.

Having once got into the tree Nessa would gladly have spent the morning there. But the children had no notion of allowing the appreciation of their roost to take that form, and for the next two or three hours she was trotted backwards and forwards from one favorite place to another, till when twelve o'clock came she was glad to go with the children to the back-door and receive at Donnie s hands a glass of milk and a slice of brown cake.

The children would not have left her then but for their anxiety to talk over Murtagh's plan. He had already in whispers confided to them the rough sketch of it, and it promised indeed to be so delightful that after disposing of their cake and milk in the yard they could restrain themselves no longer; and, leaving Nessa to enter the house alone, they merrily scampered back to the chestnut-tree to hold their consultation.

Their wonderful plan was simply this: that they were to discover Nessa to be the real princess of their tribe, and on Murtagh's birthday they were to have on the mountains the grand ceremony of crowning and receiving her into the tribe. It was the details of the plan that were so specially delightful, Murtagh said; particularly one.

"Now then, listen," he said, when they had all got back to the chestnut-tree, and he had settled himself comfortably astride a thick branch; "it's all been floating into my head the whole of this morning, and I'll tell you just how I've planned it. We'll have a regular grand—what d' ye call it? like when the Lord Lieutenant was made Knight of St. Patrick, up——"

"Ceremony," interpolated Winnie.

"Yes, ceremony, up in the ruins. We'll make a throne of stones in the middle of the court-yard, and we'll decorate it with green branches. Then we'll have garlands of evergreens and hollyhocks, and loop them up on the walls all round, and we'll have a green ribbon and a wreath of shamrocks. And I'll be sitting on the throne, and all the followers standing round. Then you four will bring her up the mountain, and as soon as she comes near, the followers will run forward and scatter shamrocks on the ground for her to walk over, and she'll be led up to the throne. Then I'll get down off the throne, and I'll say, 'Will you reign over us, our princess? and will you promise to be true to our tribe?' or something like that, and she'll say, 'Yes,' and I'll tie the green ribbon round her arm. Then comes the beautiful part of the plan! I'll make her promise to hate Mr. Plunkett, and to defend us against him."

"Oh, Murtagh!" exclaimed Rosie. "You won't be able to do that. You know she's grown up and she would never promise that."

"Yes, but you don't know how I'm going to do it," returned Murtagh triumphantly. "Just wait till you hear. After I've put on the ribbon I'll take up the shamrock wreath, and I'll say: 'Kneel down, and promise to hate the Agents, and to defend your tribe against them.' And she won't know, you see, about Mr. Plunkett being an Agent; she'll only know about them being something very bad, and so she'll say 'Yes.'"

"Then she'll be bound to help us when we get into scrapes with him; won't she?" asked Bobbo.

"Of course she will," returned Murtagh. "She'll be as much one of the tribe as you are, then."

"Oh, I say, Myrrh," cried Winnie, clapping her hands, "it's perfectly delicious. What a sell for old Plunkett!"

"What an awful lark!" said Bobbo. "It will serve him out so jolly right!"

"And look here, Myrrh," said Winnie, whose head was already full of minor details; "you must get a string for the violin with sixpence of your birthday money, and we'll teach all the children to sing some songs—'The Wearing of the Green,' and 'the Shan Van Vaugh,' and ——"

"Yes," said Murtagh, "but I haven't told you yet what we're going to do with the rest of the money. You only know half the plan. With all the rest of the money we'll buy buns and things for the followers to eat, and Donnie'll give us a lot of tea, so they'll have a kind of school-feast after the ceremony; because, you know, they'll be awfully hungry, and they will be so pleased."

Never had any one imagined a more delightful birthday plan, and the children proceeded eagerly to discuss every possible detail. The number of buns and barmbracks had to be calculated, the "followers'" appetites guessed at; their voices, their appearance, the songs to be chosen, the decorations, the order of the ceremony,—all were subjects of the warmest interest.

"Isn't papa a dear old blessing of a father, remembering about my birthday all that way off, and sending me half a sovereign?" exclaimed Murtagh, gratefully pulling his letter out of his pocket and looking at it. "I never knew any one like him in all my life, he does think about things so. I wonder if he knew what a lot of fun we should have with it!"

"Oh, and I'll tell you what we must do, Myrrh!" exclaimed Winnie, completely engrossed by the matter in hand. "Every one of the followers must have a large green branch in his hand, like Birnam wood in the theatre. It'll make them look more. You remember about Macbeth in the theatre," she explained, seeing Rosie looked puzzled.

"Oh yes, of course," replied Rosie, who didn't remember a bit. "And I'll tell you, too, we'll get a lot of apples for the feast. They'll be nearly as great a treat as cakes for the followers, because they never have any."

"Yes, yes," cried Bobbo. But Murtagh objected.

"No," he said decidedly, poking his letter into his pocket again. "We won't."

"Hullo!" remarked Bobbo. "Why not?"

"Well," said Murtagh, looking at Winnie in hopes of support, "I don't want to have anything wrong at all in this plan. It's just to be a bit of fun, and so I think we had better keep clear of old Plunkett."

"Oh, stuff!" said Rosie. "Apples are nothing. He's used to us taking them."

"Yes, but," replied Murtagh, "papa gave us the money, and the grown-up people would all say we oughtn't to take them, so I vote we leave the beastly things alone. He's sure to make it an excuse for talking to us."

It was Murtagh's plan, and Murtagh's birthday, so he had a right to decide. But when the question of the apples was settled a thousand other questions arose, and they were far from being all decided when the second dinner-bell summoned the children to the house.

But the village children had to be made acquainted as soon as possible with the fact that their services would be required, and as the tribe that the children were so fond of talking about consisted exclusively of their five selves, they felt that there was some difficulty about calling together the honorary members upon whom they had so recently conferred the rank and title of followers.

However there was Pat O'Toole, a young friend and favorite of Murtagh's, to whom they had once confided their notion of enrolling themselves into a tribe, and there was Theresa Curran, who might fairly now be said to belong to it, and with these two to help they would easily be able to organize their festival.

A proposal from Nessa to go and visit Mrs. Daly after lunch was therefore accepted with delight, and while she sat and chatted with Mrs. Daly the children carried off Theresa for a consultation. Pat O'Toole also was summoned, and the wonderful plan was unfolded. It was received with enthusiasm. Anything the young ladies and gentlemen wanted was sure to be found charming, and this manner of doing honor to Nessa was just after the hearts of the people, with whom she was already in highest favor.

It was all even more easy to arrange than the children had expected. Pat and Theresa charged themselves with collecting the "followers," and Murtagh gleefully gave orders that they were to assemble that very afternoon for a first singing practice on one of the little islands.

The children came dancing home, elated and happy. What a pity all days were not like this day! Everything went well, and they felt so good and bright as they raced and capered about the lawns.

Nessa went in-doors on her return from the village, but they never went in till evening, and to-day of all days it was impossible to sit still.

Alas! their little active feet were always tripping into mischief. After a time they took it into their heads to go and prepare the island for the singing meeting. To reach it they had to cross a little bridge quite close to the garden-gate, and unfortunately, as they were racing back after having completed their preparations, they came upon Bland driving a horse and cart through the river. The horse had refused to cross the bridge, which was without a parapet; and as the children came up they found that Bland had by precaution taken out the lading of the cart before driving through the water. Large baskets of apples stood ranged side by side upon the bridge.

"Ha, ha!" cried Bland, seeing the children as he landed the cart safely and began to load it again. "We 've conquered you at last, my young gentlemen. You 'll have to do without apples now whether you like it or not. Every one in the garden was picked this morning by Mr. Plunkett's orders."

"I 'm sure I don't care," replied Murtagh, feeling too good-humored to be annoyed. "I don't want the beastly things."

"Sour grapes, young gentleman, sour grapes!" replied Bland, chuckling. "I daresay you were on your way to the garden now, if the truth were known."

"We weren't anything of the sort, as it happens," said Bobbo.

"We 'd made up our minds just this very morning not to take any," added Rosie.

"Easy talking. Words don't cost much; but I 'd have been sorry to trust you under a tree of ripe apples," returned Bland, wiping his face after the exertion of getting one of the baskets into the cart.

"Shut up your impudence," said Murtagh, "or I 'll just turn one of these baskets into the river, to show you how little we care for your stupid old garden stuff."

"Oh, ay. It 's not so pleasant being circumvented. I don't wonder you don't like it. But here 's an end of your apple-eating for this winter. In another hour every apple that was in the garden this morning will be safe in the apple-room, and the key in Mr. Plunkett's pocket."

"Here, Myrrh," said Winnie laughing, and pushing one of the heavy baskets as she spoke, "help me to give it a shove, and we 'll teach them not to crow before they 're out of the bush. Hurrah, there it goes! What do you think of that, Mr. Bland?" she cried triumphantly, as with the help of a hearty push from Bobbo and Murtagh the basket toppled over into the river, and a bushel of rosy-cheeked apples bobbed up and down in the rapid current. Then, without waiting for any answer from indignant Bland, the children all ran away laughing, leaving him to finish loading his cart, and to go to Mr. Plunkett with another complaint of their unruliness.

"What a pity I did it though, Myrrh! I 'm very sorry," said Winnie, with a queer twinkle in her eyes, as they stopped on the hall-door steps. "But I forgot all about meaning not to take any more apples. It was such a jolly sell for Bland, just when he thought he 'd got them so safe; and he didn't think we 'd do it really."

"I 'd like to see Mr. Plunkett's face when Bland tells him," said Bobbo laughing. "Why, we took more apples that way than we 'd have taken in two months just for eating! It 'll teach him to try and circumvent us."

"I 'm sorry all the same," returned Winnie, laughing in spite of herself. "I am really, Myrrh."

"You don't look very bad," answered Murtagh. "Still if you want to cry I 'll run and get you a pocket-handkerchief."

Just then they overheard Nessa's voice through the open drawing-room door, saying: "Have you asked Master Murtagh? He might possibly know what has become of them."

"Master Murtagh! Master Murtagh 's not far off, and if it 's anything important I 've no objection to go and ask his opinion," exclaimed Murtagh, taking a flying leap over one of the hall-chairs, and confronting Mrs. Donegan as she made her appearance through a doorway.

"'Deed, Master Murtagh," returned Donnie, "it 's no matter for joking. The only two decent shirts you have in the world have gone clean out of your linen drawer. I 've hunted for them high and low, and you 'll have to go to church to-morrow without a rag to your back. It 's too bad the way the things is spirited here and spirited there. You can't lay a thing out of your hand but it 's gone before you turn round."

Murtagh and Winnie being in an excitable state of high spirits, both burst out laughing, and Bobbo called out: "It was'nt your shirts she had, was it?"

"Yes," ejaculated Winnie through her laughter. "Oh, Donnie, for goodness' sake, don't look so funny; you 'll kill me with laughing. Look here," she continued, holding her sides and trying to control her mirth, "you needn't look so astonished; she wanted them a great deal worse than Murtagh, and she hadn't got any money to buy some."

"Miss Winnie, how can you talk in such a way! Do you suppose, I 'd like to know, that I hemmed and stitched at them shirts for you to give 'em away?" returned Mrs. Donegan indignantly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Miss, to go and leave your brother without a thing to go to church in of a Sunday morning."

"I have a splendid new flannel petticoat," laughed Winnie, "and I 'll lend it to him with all the pleasure in life."

"It 's time such doings were put a stop to," returned Mrs. Donegan. "Mr. Murtagh, how could ye think of doing such a thing?"

"I 've been to Mr. Murtagh," returned Murtagh gravely, "and he says he can't give any opinion on the matter."

"Then you may tell him from me he ought to be ashamed of himself, an' it would be a good thing if he 'd given his opinion before now. I 'm sure I have more bother than enough with him, returned Mrs. Donegan, for once quite out of temper; "and now I 'll have to stand and argufy half an hour with Mr. Plunkett before I get the money for some new ones."

"Did you know where they were, Murtagh?" asked Nessa, coming to the drawing-room door.

"Yes," replied Murtagh, not quite certain whether he felt inclined to laugh or to blush. And then Winnie explained how they had gone.

"Ye'd make a mighty generous churchwarden," remarked Donnie, as she walked off in high dudgeon to the kitchen.

The children troubled themselves very little about Donnie's scolding. But Nessa told them that she did not think they ought to give away their clothes; it was not right to be troublesome. And her little exercise of elder-sisterly rights awoke sundry uncomfortable scruples in their minds connected with their late destruction of their uncle's fruit. By tacit consent, however, the untimely fate of the apples was not alluded to in Nessa's presence, and next morning the children themselves had forgotten it.

Not so Mr. Plunkett. The incident irritated him; he saw in it a fresh defiance from the children, and when next day it was followed by Mrs. Donegan's request for new flannel shirts for Murtagh, he resolved that they should be made for once to feel his authority.

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CHAPTER XV.

"I NEVER heard of such a shame in my life. It's my own money, and I don't care what you say. I *will* have it. It's downright cheating."

Murtagh's white face and angry flashing eyes added vehemence to his words. He was standing opposite Mr. Plunkett, his little figure drawn up to its full height, one foot slightly advanced, one hand resting on a corner of the table, his hair tossed, his clothes untidy as usual, his whole attitude breathing indignation and defiance.

The other children stood in a group behind him casting hot indignant glances at Mr. Plunkett, who seemed quite unmoved. He was standing near the fire with his hat on and an umbrella in his hand. He was determined not to let himself be provoked into losing his temper, and now replied to Murtagh's words:

"To take new clothes for which your father had paid, and give them away without his permission, resembles stealing. You chose to do it when you thought it would cost you nothing, and it is perfectly just that you should bear the consequences."

"It is not right. It is not just," returned Murtagh. "Papa said I was to have that half-sovereign as a birth day present, and nobody in the world has a right to keep it from me."

"Besides," burst out Winnie, "Murtagh didn't take the shirts; I took them. I threw the apples in the river too, only you always like to fix everything on him."

"It was just the same thing," replied Mr. Plunkett. "Murtagh should not have allowed them to be taken. "You don't seem to understand," he continued, addressing Murtagh, and speaking as though Winnie's remark had not been made, "that in this world if you take what does not belong to you you must pay for it. I am the steward of your father's money in all that concerns you, and in his interest I intend that you shall pay him back for the shirts you chose to give away. Had your general conduct been such as to justify me in overlooking this offence I should have taken upon myself the responsibility of paying for your new shirts with his money; but it is not so, and I am in no way disposed to shield you from the just consequences of your actions."

"It's not in papa's interest, you know it isn't. Just as if he would care for two beastly shirts. You're just doing it because you like to plague us, and oppress us, and drive us into being wicked," replied Murtagh passionately.

"I tell you what, young gentleman, if you were my son for just ten minutes I would teach you not to use such impertinent language to your elders," returned Plunkett, whose temper was not enduring.

"If you don't want me to talk to you like that you shouldn't behave so. It's my own money, that papa gave me to enjoy ourselves with, and I can't help talking to you in that way when you keep it from me. You have no right to."

"I thought you might have listened to reason," replied Mr. Plunkett coldly, "but since you choose to behave like an infant you shall be treated like an infant. I have the money and I shall keep it. If there is any over when your shirts have been paid for, it shall be returned to you." So saying he moved away towards the door.

"I *will* have it all," said Murtagh. "I don't care so much about the money, but you have no right to keep it when it's my own that papa gave me."

Mr. Plunkett left the room without making any answer. But Winnie's indignation now burst beyond all bounds, and dashing to the door she called after him: "He shall have every penny of it. It's his very own, and if you steal it I'll steal some of yours. So there now. You have fair warning."

Nessa happened to be coming down the passage just at that moment, and she overheard the speech.

"What is the matter?" she asked, looking round at the angry faces.

"Oh, it's too bad," said Winnie; "he's going to steal Murtagh's half-sovereign that papa gave him. It's just like him; he's always perfectly delighted to get a chance of plaguing us, and he thinks just because he's the strongest and has got the money, that he'll conquer this time, but he shan't, I can tell him."

"What do you mean?" said Nessa. "Steal Murtagh's half-sovereign! I don't understand."

"He says he won't give it to him," replied Winnie, calming down a little. "He's going to keep it to pay for the shirts we gave Theresa, and it was my plan about cutting them up, and I took them out of the drawer. He has no right to take Murtagh's money to pay for what I did."

"And now we can't have the feast, nor the expedition, nor anything," said Rosie, "and we 've asked all the children. What shall we do? We can't tell them not to come."

Murtagh was too angry to speak a word. He stood where Mr. Plunkett had left him, kicking the leg of the table, and looking as though at that moment he would have cut Mr. Plunkett's throat with pleasure.

Nessa looked at him regretfully; and then she asked Winnie in a tone almost as disappointed as Rosie's: "How is it that you did not know till now?"

"I don't know," said Winnie. "He never said a single word till just now he came in here, and we asked him to give us the money to-day instead of the day after to-morrow, and he said: 'I have no money to give you.' First we thought he had forgotten, and we reminded him about the half-sovereign. Then he said: 'You spent that some time ago;' and he told us we were not to have it because of the shirts. And it isn't only that he won't give us our money," she continued, trying to keep down her rising anger, "but oh! he does do things in such a dreadfully disagreeable way. You don't know what he 's like."

"I am so sorry," said Nessa, full of unlawful sympathy. "What can we do?"

"We can't do anything," replied Rosie. "We 'll just have to disappoint everybody and do without our feast, and it was such a beautiful plan. You didn't know half of it."

"He has no right to Murtagh's money, and he shan't keep it," said Bobbo, marching indignantly out of the room as he spoke. The other children followed him away out of doors; and whatever she might feel for their disappointment, Nessa had no further opportunity of trying to console them, for she saw no more of them all day.

No further opportunity of trying to console them with words, that is to say; but what would Mr. Plunkett have thought had he seen her a little later that afternoon?

She was thoroughly vexed at the notion of the birthday being spoilt. The children had confided to her all their joy in the prospect of feasting the followers; they had told her how they were determined to have no wrong side to this "adventure;" and they had been so happy in the anticipation of this perfect birthday that it seemed really cruel to deprive them of their innocent pleasure.

The affair with Theresa had been a mistake from beginning to end. What was the use of raking up the consequences of it? Yes; the more Nessa thought, the more provoked she felt. Mr. Plunkett did not understand the children at all.

But suddenly a brilliant idea crossed her mind. She laughed aloud a merry little laugh; then jumping up she marched straightway to the kitchen. There dear old Donnie was taken into counsel, and with small regard for principles of justice they hatched between them a plot — well, a plot for which the best excuse they could find was, that, as Nessa said, "It was such a pity not to be happy on a birthday."

"Never you fear, Miss Nessa," replied Mrs. Donegan. "It's me is housekeeper here, thank the Lord, and not Mr. Plunkett; and the children shall have a better feast than ever they'd buy with their poor little bit of money. Bless their hearts! they don't know the value of things. Whatever does he want, plaguing and worritting them for a couple o' little shirts, as if children won't be children all the world over!"

Nessa discreetly "supposed that Mr. Plunkett had his reasons;" but her eyes sparkled merrily as she added that she thought there could be no harm in giving the children a picnic to celebrate the birthday.

"'Deed and, Miss Nessa, if you want to know the truth of it, shadow a bit I care whether it's harm or no," replied old Donnie, laughing outright. "If the children have the fancy to feast all them dirty little vagabones out of the village, why they shall feast them for all the Mr. Plunketts ever lived between this and Limerick. An' it's a pleasure to me to have the crossing of him for once, so it is."

"Well, don't tell that to the children, you wicked old thing," replied Nessa, laughing; and away she went singing along the passages without one pang of conscience for what she had done.

That evening she gleefully recounted her misdoings to her uncle, but the children gave her no opportunity of announcing to them the plan that had been arranged during their absence; they did not return to the house during the afternoon, and in the evening when Nessa went to look for them they were not in the school-room.

After she was in bed the idea occurred to her that perhaps they had not come in. It would be just like them to start away up the mountains after tea and not come home till the servants were in bed. Nothing would have surprised her in them; and she believed them quite capable of spending the night on the wet grass under the chestnut-tree if they happened to find the doors locked.

She told herself that the idea was foolish, but having once got it into her head she could not get it out again. And so, after turning and twisting two or three times upon her pillow, she decided that the best thing she could do was to go and see for herself if they were really and truly in their beds.

Slipping on her warm white dressing-gown she set off on her journey across the house; and great was her satisfaction as she softly opened the door of the little girls' bedroom, to hear through the darkness a sound of regular breathing which announced that its rightful inhabitants were not only in possession but were sound asleep.

Her mind was relieved, and she thought herself very foolish for her pains as she crossed the passage and looked also into the boys' room. Two little beds gleamed white in the far corners, but the lights and shadows were so disposed that Nessa was doubtful for a moment whether they were occupied. She advanced to the side of one of them, and while she stood contemplating Master Bobbo, whom she found safely enough tucked up in the bedclothes, a low "Nessa, is that you?" came from the other corner of the room.

She turned and saw Murtagh's dark eyes fixed upon her. "Yes," she replied, moving to his side of the room. "I hope I did not wake you?"

He looked at her for a moment without raising his head from the pillow; then he said in the same low voice: "We 've got the money. Bobbo got it, and I can't go to sleep, I don't know what to do."

"How did you get it?" asked Nessa, kneeling down on the floor beside the low bed in order to speak without waking Bobbo. "What made Mr. Plunkett change his mind?"

"Mr. Plunkett didn't change his mind; Bobbo got it the way Winnie said, while Mr. Plunkett was down at supper."

"Do you mean he *stole* it?" asked Nessa in dismay.

"Yes," replied Murtagh. "At least I mean, you know, it isn't stealing really. Bobbo and Rosie say they 're quite certain it couldn't be stealing because it 's only our own money; papa said we were to have it, and Winnie says she thinks so too." Murtagh was evidently not quite convinced of the truth of his arguments, for he spoke in a persuasive tone of voice.

"Oh, Murtagh, I am so sorry you have done that!" said Nessa, greatly troubled. "It *is* stealing."

"It 's our own money though," said Murtagh. "Papa said we were to have one half-sovereign from Mr. Plunkett, and this will be only one; only Winnie and I thought we didn't care about spending it now any more; we thought we 'd like to bury it in the island or somewhere. Then we wouldn't have submitted to him tyrannizing; but nobody could say we 'd regularly —— You don't think it could be *real* stealing, do you?" he asked, breaking off the other sentence, as though he shrank from saying the ugly-sounding word.

"Yes, I do," said Nessa. "But you will give it back, because, listen, Murtagh —"

"There's Winnie," said Murtagh, who was lying with his face turned to the door.

Nessa turned and saw a little barefooted white figure standing in the middle of the room. It was Winnie, who had overheard Nessa's last words.

"It can't be stealing," she said, coming up to the bedside. "I 've been thinking about it ever since we went to bed, and it 's our own."

"No," replied Nessa, lifting up one side of her dressing-gown for the little shivering figure to creep under. "It 's not your own. You are mistaking. You are doing something that will not be honorable. Listen, I can explain it to you quite plainly. Two new shirts will cost about seven shillings and sixpence, so you gave seven and sixpence to Theresa. That is, you spent seven and sixpence, and now you have only half-a-crown. You have not got a whole half-sovereign; it would be just common stealing to take it. And then, another thing," she continued warmly, "even if it was your own I don't think it is honorable to creep into a person's house to take something when his back is turned; it would be better to lose twenty half-sovereigns. It does not matter if a gentleman loses his rights, but it does matter very much if he stoops to get them back by deceit."

This view was new to the children. They were too firmly entrenched in their own opinion to be convinced in a moment, but their rights began somehow to seem to them small things after all. They tried to reproduce the arguments with which they had convinced themselves; but reasons, excellent before, sounded weak and empty now, and after a faint attempt to defend themselves they accepted Nessa's view.

"Well, we 'll give it back to him to-morrow morning," said Murtagh finally. "But if I live to be a hundred years old," he added, "I shall always hate him. He 's spoiled every bit of our pleasure; it may be just, but he wouldn't have done it if he hadn't wanted to spite us for throwing the apples in the river."

"Did you throw apples in the river?" asked Nessa

"You see it is such a pity you are naughty. You vex Mr. Plunkett and he vexes you. Couldn't you try to be good?"

"No," said Murtagh, "I can't be good, because as soon as I do try he does something that makes us bad again, worse than ever."

"There 's one good thing," remarked Winnie, pursuing her own train of thought. "He 'll know now that we could have had the money if we had chosen to keep it."

Nessa did not know what to say to them. She only gave a little sigh and said that she thought it was a great pity not to be friends with people. Then she said "Good night" to Murtagh, and under the shelter of her dressing-gown conveyed Winnie back to her little bed.

Murtagh and Winnie apparently broke to the others early next morning the news of the intended restitution, for when Nessa met them at the breakfast-table, Bobbo said to her good-humoredly, in a half-confidential whisper:

"All right; I don't mind; I only said he shouldn't keep it, so I just took it to show him he shouldn't; this way will do just as well."

Rosie was the one who disapproved most highly, for she very much disliked the prospect of giving up their delightful birthday-plan. Her anger was all directed against Mr. Plunkett. Since Nessa said it would be real stealing to keep the half-sovereign, she was willing that it should be given back. She had taken a great fancy to Nessa, and was anxious to stand well in her esteem. But as for Mr. Plunkett, no words could be bad enough for him, she thought. It was all humbug and nonsense about it being just; he didn't care a bit whether it was just or not. He was doing it to spite them and nothing else. So Rosie said to Mrs. Donegan, as the children dawdled through the kitchen after breakfast:

"And how can we manage about the feast?" she lamented. "It's so dreadful to ask people to come, and then tell them they mustn't because we haven't got any money."

"'Deed if Mr. Plunkett thinks I'm going to stand by quiet and see such a slight put on Mr. Launcelot's children he's mighty mistaken," returned Donnie, her indignation flaming out all anew. "Never you fear, honeys, but ye shall have a feast right enough, and a better one than ever came out of a confectioner's shop, I'll warrant. If that's all ye were going to spend your money on ye shall have ye're money's worth. 'Deed, for the matter o' that, it was Miss Nessa herself came to the kitchen and settled it wid me yesterday. And as for Mr. Plunkett, I don't know where his heart is at all or if he has one, to see yez exposed like that before a parcel of ignorant gossoons that would know no better than to laugh at ye."

"Oh, Donnie!" exclaimed the children in delight, "do you mean you'll give us the things we'll want for them to eat?"

"Just settle amongst yourselves what yez want, and let me know by dinner time. I'll hurry through with my work this morning, and all ye need trouble yourselves is to bring the cart round to-morrow to the kitchen-door."

"You darling old Honey-donnie! Won't it be a sell for Mr. Plunkett?" exclaimed Bobbo, while Murtagh's face lit up joyously, and the little girls began to arrange what they would want.

"Apple-pie and custards I vote for!" exclaimed Murtagh, breaking in upon their discussion; "only let's look sharp about arranging, because Nessa has sent to ask Mr. Plunkett to come to the drawing-room."

"Ye won't let on a word to Mr. Plunkett," said Donnie, who in her secret heart was as much afraid of him as anybody. "The hen that lays the eggs is the best to hatch them."

"You needn't be afraid. We're not likely to have much conversation with him," returned Murtagh with a scornful intonation. "But did Nessa really think about that yesterday?"

"She did so," replied Donnie. "She came in there at the door, and I was whipping the cream here by the table, and 'Donnie,' says she with her sweet-looking way, 'the poor children have got into a great scrape;' and then she told me all about it, and we put our heads together. And if two women can't circumvent Mr. Plunkett," added Donnie laughing, "good Lord! he's sharper than I take him for!"

"How awfully jolly of her!" exclaimed Murtagh; "come along off to the drawing-room, and let's thank her before old Plunkett arrives."

"Oh, ay!" said Donnie, "that's it, and never a word o' thanks for me that'll have all the bother!"

But the children were already rushing off to the drawing-room, and paid not the smallest attention to her complaint.

They were in full flow of enthusiastic thanks and merry plan-making when Mr. Plunkett's step was heard crossing the hall.

"Whisht!" cried Murtagh. "Here comes the man-eater! where's his pill?" Bobbo exploded with laughter, and Murtagh desperately hunting in all his pockets had but just time to find the half-sovereign before Mr. Plunkett entered the room. Nessa feared for a moment that the children were going to turn the whole affair into a joke, but at sight of Mr. Plunkett every sign of laughter vanished from their faces.

Mr. Plunkett turned to Nessa and inquired politely what she wished to speak to him about.

"It is Murtagh who wishes to speak to you," she replied, glancing toward Murtagh to see whether he wished her to explain further. But Murtagh, without any apparent bashfulness, advanced and said with a grave dignity of manner that astonished Nessa:

"I wanted to give you back this. We took it yesterday because we thought you had no right to keep it from us; but now we have been thinking, and you are just, though you needn't have done it." As he spoke he handed the half-sovereign to Mr. Plunkett, and then, determined to say nothing more on the subject, he turned away and left the room.

"I do not understand," said Mr. Plunkett, looking at the coin lying in the palm of his hand. "I never heard of such a thing! What does the boy mean? Did he steal it?"

"No," said Bobbo, turning very red and stammering, for he never could help feeling a little frightened when he was actually in Mr. Plunkett's presence; "I took it because it was Murtagh's own, and it 's a horrid shame the way you plague him!"

"Bobbo," said Nessa reproachfully, "you are not polite!"

"Polite! Miss Blair," said Mr. Plunkett, "neither he nor his brother ever are polite. But this," he continued, looking down again at the half-sovereign, "this is more than I expected even from them! I did think they would have hesitated before taking money that does not belong to them. Since it is not so, why I shall for the future be careful to lock up my purse. They are certainly charming young gentlemen!"

The scornful accentuation of the last word flushed the children's cheeks with anger, but for once they controlled themselves, and without speaking went out to rejoin Murtagh.

"Do not be too hard on them," pleaded Nessa, turning to Mr. Plunkett as the door closed behind them. "They thought they had a right to take it. You see how they give it back to you now."

"I do not pretend to be acquainted with their thoughts, Miss Blair, but in my eyes nothing can excuse a downright theft," replied Mr. Plunkett, and he bowed and left the room.

"Ah!" sighed Murtagh on the terrace as the children, joining him, repeated Mr. Plunkett's every word and gesture. "It is too bad the way every plan we have gets spoilt; I did think this one was going to be all right!"

"Well, you know there's one thing," said Winnie, "it has been all right really. About the shirts was our last plan; and we gave back the money when we thought that part wasn't right."

"Yes; but it's all the same, the way things get mixed up. You do one little thing, and then that makes you have to do a lot more. First we took Theresa, that made us want the money; then wanting the money made us give Theresa the shirts to make her happy. Then giving her the shirts made old Plunkett take our money, and that made us take his, and that made us all in a rage, and I don't care about the ceremony or anything now."

"Never mind, Myrrh," exclaimed Winnie. "It's no good making ourselves miserable now. Put it out of your head. That's what I do. I always keep some awfully jolly thing in my mind for thinking about, and then when I have any troubles I think of it instead. My thing now is what the followers will look like when they see the feast spread out. Can't you imagine?—their eyes will get so big, and their faces will get red all over."

"Oh, yes," said Murtagh, "and we must lay it out on the other side of the courtyard wall, so that they mayn't see it at first, because they will be so surprised."

And then forgetting their anger the children talked merrily on, till twelve o'clock ringing out from the stables reminded them that they were hungry.

With the half-crown that remained from Murtagh's money they bought that afternoon the green ribbon which they considered indispensable to the proper celebration of the ceremony; and having employed every spare minute of the day in making evergreen wreaths, they had a last grand singing practice on the island, and went to bed early, so as to make the morrow come quicker.

CHAPTER XVI.

"I SAY, Winnie," called Murtagh dolefully at the door of the little girls' bed-room next morning, "it's an awfully bad day, quite dull and dark, and preciously cold, too. What is to be done?"

"Oh, Myrrh, what a pity!" returned Winnie, getting out of bed and rubbing her sleepy eyes. "Yes," she continued, coming into the passage and climbing on to the high window-sill to look out, "so it is; quite cloudy looking all over the sky. Well, we had better not stand here in our night-gowns. Let us get dressed quickly; perhaps it will look better out of doors. My teeth are chattering." With a little shiver she vanished into her bed-room, but putting her head out again to exclaim: "Many happy returns of the day! Mind, I was first!" and the next minute an "Ugh! How cold it is!" accompanied by a sound of vigorous splashing, announced that she was in her bath.

In another quarter of an hour all four children were coming down the stairs, their footsteps echoing through the stillness of the house in a ghostly fashion that harmonized with the lingering darkness.

"What a lazy pig that Peggy is!" exclaimed Murtagh, as he opened the door of the school-room and found the shutters still closed. "Not a single one of the down-stair windows open yet, and no fire. Let us go and warm ourselves in the kitchen."

"I wonder what time it is," said Rosie, with a yawn. It was too dark to see the clock as they crossed the hall, but in the kitchen they found the smoldering embers of yesterday's fire, and with the aid of a log of wood and the bellows they soon had a roaring blaze. Then Rosie spied the coffee-pot with some remains of coffee; and Bobbo, who had been to the servants' hall to see if Donnie were there, returned without Donnie, but with a loaf of bread and some butter. Winnie climbed on the dresser and peeped into jugs and bowls till she found milk and sugar, and then they all sat round the fire and made toast and sipped hot coffee till they felt thoroughly warm and comfortable.

"There," said Winnie, putting her last mouthful into her mouth. "Now let us go out and get our wreaths packed in the cart ready for starting. We've got a tremendous lot to do."

"All right," said Bobbo. "I feel very jolly now; only, do you know, when first I got up I did feel so queer and sickish. I thought I was going to be ill."

"So did I," replied Winnie. "How funny! I wonder what it was! Did you feel anything queer, Rosie?"

But Rosie had laid her head down on a log of wood and was sound asleep.

"I say, Rosie! Wake up; what in the world are you going to sleep for? We must set to work if we want to be ready in time," exclaimed Murtagh, and with a push and a little shake Rosie was wakened up again.

Crossing the kitchen the children unbarred the door and went out into the yard. The cold gray light was barely sufficient to enable them to see their way, and the air was very keen.

Murtagh sniffing it said: "I suppose it's pretty early. How nice and fresh everything always smells at this time of the day." But the others seemed to think it more fresh than nice, and shivered as they went along.

There was no one in the haggart where the cart-shed was, so they took out the cart and loaded it with their evergreen wreaths and sheaves of hollyhocks. The wreaths had been soaking in a sheltered little harbor of the river all night, and now, fresh and glistening, they looked so pretty that though the cart was almost full the children unanimously decided to make some more.

"Only let us do it indoors," said Rosie, "I am dreadfully cold." So with many laments over the dreary weather, they carried bundles of flowers and evergreens into the kitchen. Donnie was not there, the fire was blazing up splendidly as when they left it, and they sat themselves down upon the hearth to work in the pleasant warmth. At first the garlands got on fast, but soon Rosie's head went down again on the log of wood, and the flowers dropped out of her hands. Then Bobbo thought he could work much more comfortably lying down; presently his heavy eyelids drooped over his eyes, and though one hand kept tight hold of his wreath the other got somehow under his head for a pillow.

"Never mind," said Murtagh, "let them sleep; you and I must work double."

"What's that striking?" asked Winnie as a stroke rang out from the hall clock.

"One, two, three, four," counted Murtagh. "Oh, we are in very good time; still it's not too early, we have plenty to do."

But notwithstanding all there was to be done Winnie's head began to droop, and she woke herself up with a start presently, only to see that Murtagh was curled up in a ball sound asleep. She made an effort to rouse herself thoroughly, and continued to tie pink and white hollyhocks in among the laurel leaves, proud and delighted to be the only one awake. Soon, however, one of the hollyhock blossoms began to grow larger and larger till it turned into a fairy palace built of rainbows and precious stones, where extraordinary things began to happen; and the end of it all was that when Mrs. Donegan came down at six o'clock she found four children sound asleep among the evergreens.

"Bless their dear little hearts!" she murmured, standing and looking down at them. "May your sleep always be as light-hearted, ye little innocent lambs!" And then for fear they might be disturbed she would not let the maids into the kitchen, but moved about on tiptoe doing herself whatever was to be done.

Theresa came a great many times to the back door to know if the children were coming, but Mrs. Donegan told her to go about her business, she wasn't going to have them awakened; and not till eight o'clock did they stir.

Murtagh woke first; he sat up and rubbed his eyes. The kitchen was an airy south room, and the bright morning sun was pouring in at the big windows. At first he could not understand how he came down there but then, recollecting, he sprang to his feet with a joyous bound, exclaiming:

"Wake up! Hurrah! it's a glorious day after all!"

"How jolly!" returned Winnie, waking at once but dazzled with the glare of light.

"Why," said Bobbo, sitting up in his turn and rubbing his eyes, "however did it get so sunny?"

"The sun has been lighting the lamps while you were asleep, Master Bobbo, honey," replied Donnie.

"But I've only just been asleep a minute; I just shut my eyes because—" The others began to laugh; but Bobbo insisted, and was getting into hot argument, when the ringing of the breakfast bell announced that any how it was eight o'clock now.

"Never mind, Bobbo, you've only been asleep two minutes if you like!" exclaimed Murtagh racing off. "I feel a great deal too jolly to care twopence;" and the next minute they were all entering the dining-room; where, finding it empty, Murtagh entertained them with an impromptu farce, entitled—"The benefits of early rising."

They did not dawdle long over breakfast that day, but were soon out on their way to the haggart. The followers were eagerly expecting them, and they were received with a shout of welcome.

"Long life to you, Master Murtagh!" burst from about twenty lusty throats. "May ye live to see many another birthday, and each one be happier than the last!" The last part of the speech came from Pat O'Toole. He was a black-haired, blue-eyed boy, older than Murtagh by some three or four years. But perhaps by reason of his small stature—perhaps because of a certain capacity for admiration which he possessed, he always seemed to the children younger than Murtagh, and far from attempting to lead, he was one of their most devoted servitors.

"Thank you!" returned Murtagh heartily, remembering for the first time that he was the hero of the day. "But I don't think any birthday could be happier than this. Did you ever see such a glorious day?"

"It's not likely the sun 'd be behindhand in wishin' you good luck," returned Pat O'Toole.

But time was too precious to be wasted in compliments.

"We're all here, aren't we?" said Murtagh. "So now let us get the horse into the cart and be off; oh Gollyloo, to think it's come at last!"

Very soon the horse was harnessed to the cart. Pat Molony, who generally drove it, informed them that he was under orders to bring down a lot of fresh-cut grass from a certain meadow; but he was very good-natured, and when he saw it already loaded with flowers, and was told that they couldn't get on at all without it, he said he supposed they must have it, and he would manage somehow to make excuses to Bland.

"Now then," said Murtagh. "In you get as many as will fit without squashing the evergreens, and let us be off. Gee up, Tommie. Those who can't get in must run behind." And with a crack of the whip and a shake of the reins they started.

Tommie was a good horse, accustomed to heavy loads, so though the ground was rough they jogged away at a very fair pace. And as for there being no springs to the cart, who minded that? The sun was shining over the fields, and, perched as they were for the most part on the high sides of the cart, the children could see for miles around.

Golden stubble, dark hedges crossing and recrossing each other, patches of nut-trees here and there, low stone walls overgrown with moss and fern, and tufts of foxglove; all were equally delightful to them. They passed through picturesque tumbledown villages, where ragged babies were playing among the pigs and donkeys on the strip of grass by the roadside; and people came out of the cabins and wished them good luck, and gave them many a "God bless ye."

Not very many of the children could fit into the cart because of the flowers; but they perched upon the shafts, upon the plank that served for box-seat, upon the sides, where at the corners the position was tenable; and those who could not get a seat at all ran alongside. They jumped up and down by turns, so that none were tired; and though the feet of the runners were bare and dusty their faces were as happy as child-faces can be. Altogether it was a bright cavalcade, that red and blue painted cart full of children, with the strong brown horse trotting along, and the ragged happy escort panting, laughing, and turning somersaults around.

Jokes, laughter, cheers, and nonsense abounded. Before they had gone far Winnie and Rosie had both been presented with bouquets of wild flowers; dirty hands had robbed the hedges of rich clusters of blackberries, dirty lips were smeared with the crimson juice. But no king ever felt more proud of his dominion than Murtagh of his tribe; and truly if loving devotion is to be gloried in, Murtagh was right.

The air was exhilarating, and as they went higher they got among the heathery tops of the hills. Then looking back they could see the sea eight or nine miles off, with a silver mist upon it that gleamed freshly in the morning sun.

"Look back, Winnie! Look back now!" cried Murtagh, as they reached a hill-top from which the view was specially clear. "Did you ever see anything so lovely? See all this purple and gold at our feet, and the sparkling silver away there."

"Yes," said Winnie, turning round and taking a long look. "And to think," she added, with a little sigh, "that papa and mamma are really and truly away over there if only we could see far enough."

"Don't you feel as if you smelt the sea?" said Murtagh, throwing his head back to draw in the air better.

"Yes, and the heather," said Winnie, "doesn't it get into you and make you feel free? Oh, wouldn't it be glorious," she continued, her eyes sparkling and her face lighting up with animation, "if we could live up here really with our tribe, and race over the mountains all day, and live on blackberries, and fraughans, and nuts? To be perfectly free! Oh, Murtagh, just think what a life it would be! We'd have ponies, and ride about for weeks at a time among the hills, and we'd have a secret hiding-place, and be like good fairies to all the villages round. If any one was in trouble we would carry them off and hide them and feed them till the trouble was over, and some day when we got older we would rise and set Ireland free. Oh, I would like to be queen of a tribe, and I'd lead them into battle, and shout 'For Ireland and Liberty!'"

At first no one had paid attention to what Winnie and Murtagh were saying, but as Winnie grew excited she spoke louder, and her last words were received with a general cheer. The children's spirits were rising to such a pitch that they were glad of any excuse for making a noise.

"And we'd follow you to the death, Miss Winnie," cried Pat O'Toole.

"That would we," exclaimed the others enthusiastically. But at this moment their excitement was turned into another channel by an exclamation of "Hurrah, there's our tower!" which came from Bobbo, who was sitting on the shaft driving.

"Our tower" was a very old gray ruin of which scarcely anything remained. There was an enormously thick wall with an archway in it, and a worn flight of steps leading up through the thickness of the wall to a little room above the archway; and that, with the crumbling remains of walls which had once enclosed courtyards, on either side of the archway, formed the whole tower

"Hurrah!" echoed the others as the cart stopped at the bottom of the slope. "Now then, out with us and to work as fast as we can."

"You dear, dear old mountains, how I do love you!" cried Winnie, throwing herself flat upon the heather, whilst the others were descending from the cart. In another minute the cart was unyoked. Tommie was tethered to a tree, and the children, with their arms full of evergreens, swarmed up the slope and into the tower.

One wild scamper over the heather, a few rolls down the tower slope into the mossy ditch that divided it from the road, a thorough inspection of the tower to see that all was right, and then they set to work in earnest.

Many hands make light work, and soon the old gray walls began to smile under the garlands of pink, and white, and green, with which the children decorated them. Rosie was most useful. She had helped Cousin Jane last Christmas to decorate the parish church, and she had besides a natural gift for such work. She was a capital manager, and anything approaching to a party made her so happy that she was sure to be in the best of humors.

No one could be more charming than Rosie when she tried. She knew by instinct how to please everybody and keep everybody busy. She never told a small child to hang a wreath on a place too high for him to reach. She never wasted the height of tall children by letting them decorate the lower walls. She showed every one how to do things her way, but somehow managed with her pretty thanks to make them feel as though they had done entirely according to their own ideas. She asked every one's opinion, and though she took nobody's unless it was just the same as her own, each was left with a pleasant impression that their plan was certainly the nicest.

It was impossible that any one should be cross under the influence of such a sunny good temper, and the work went on merrily until the last garland was arranged upon the throne they had erected in the centre of the courtyard. Then Murtagh drew Rosie aside to inquire if she didn't think it was time now "to go back to fetch Nessa and the feastables." Rosie thought it was. Everything was ready except the feast, and so with many rejoicings over this most delightful of birthdays, they got into the cart again and rattled home to fetch Nessa. The followers of course stayed behind, and with a light load going down-hill Tommie would take less than no time to get back. Then they would see what Donnie had got for them, and after that there would be only the drive back again between them and the ceremony.

"Three cheers!" cried Murtagh, tossing his hat into the air. "I can hardly believe the time is really come. It seems too good to be true. I don't know which I like best, the ceremony or the feast."

"One's as good as the other, and they're both the most deliciousest plans that ever were invented," said Winnie in ecstasy. "And such a glorious day as we've got. Hurrah for the sun! Hurrah for the mountains! and hurrah for being happy and free!"

"And just think of that old brute, Mr. Plunkett, wanting to prevent us having it," chimed in Bobbo. "What harm does it do him I'd like to know?"

Murtagh's face clouded suddenly, and he muttered something between his teeth. But Rosie hated to think of disagreeable subjects when she was happy, so she said brightly: "Doesn't the tower look lovely? I never thought we should be able to make it so nice." The conversation went back to its happy strain, and Mr. Plunkett was forgotten.

They drove straight to the kitchen-door and entered, calling out: "Here we are, Donnie; out with the goodies, and let us be off again."

The goodies, as they called them, were out already; and indeed Donnie had fulfilled her promise of giving them enough and to spare. Luckily for them she had more substantial notions than Murtagh of children's appetites, and in addition to the apple-pie and custards there were meat-pies and puddings, cakes, and tarts, and everything else that children were likely to enjoy. Donnie herself was bending over a saucepan at the fire, but she did not look round or make any answer to the children's salutation.

"Donnie, you are a brick!" exclaimed Winnie and Murtagh simultaneously, at sight of the well-covered kitchen-table.

"But how in the world are we going to get all those things packed to take with us?" added Murtagh. "It would be an awful pity to spoil them after you 've made them look so nice."

"If you can't pack 'em ye 'd better leave them," returned Donnie crossly. "But whatever ye 're going to do ye 'd better make haste and be out o' this. I can't be having the place overrun with children from mornin' to night."

"Haillo! Below! What's the matter?" inquired Bobbo.

"Matter! Don't be bothering me asking questions about everything. A body can't so much as sneeze but ye 'll be asking why she did it. Here, put them in there," she added, coming over to the table and pulling out from under it a large white wicker hamper.

The children knew better than to say much to Donnie when she was in one of her present moods, so Rosie and Winnie began in silence to put some of the dishes into the hamper. However, they had not gone far in their packing before Mrs. Donegan burst out again:

"My good Lord, Miss Rosie! where do you suppose that pie-crust 'll be by the time you get up the mountains if you go putting the things one on top of another in that fashion? Here, get out o' this wid yez! I 'd rather do it myself." And down she went on her knees beside the hamper.

"Well, I don't know anything about packing. How could I?" replied Rosie rather aggrieved. But Winnie was in too high spirits to stay quiet long. Suddenly snatching off Donnie's cap she transferred it to her own head, and began with a broad imitation of Donnie's brogue to scold the children all round and tell them to "get out o' this."

"Give me back my cap this minute, Miss Winnie! How dare ye behave in such a way?" exclaimed Mrs. Donegan. But Winnie detected a twinkle in her eye that showed she was near laughing, and returned audaciously:

"Well, you just stop being so grumpy, and tell us what's the matter. Here you are!" handing her back her cap. "Cover up your poor old head, and tell us now, what made you turn so sour?"

"Sour indeed! Ye'd be sour enough yerself too if you were worrited and bothered the way I am with people writing and sayin' 'We'll be with you to-night,' as if the place was an hotel and a body hadn't enough to do without gettin' dinners and beds ready for all the rabble o' maids and fallalls they'll be bringing along with 'em. Why can't they give proper notice?"

"Cousin Jane!" exclaimed the children in voices of consternation. "It can't be any one else, because you always get in this kind of a temper when she's coming."

"Yes; it is your cousin Jane, and poor little Master Frankie, and Miss Emma, and the Lord knows how many ladies' maids, and governesses, and sich like after them. And they can't give a word of notice; but they're driven across through the mountains for Miss Emma and the governess to be sketching; and they'll be with us to-night. 'Deed they might ha' stopped without us and there'd ha' been no tears spilled."

"Oh, but Frankie!" cried Winnie in delight. "How jolly! Why yes, of course, Nessa told us ever so long ago that they were coming."

"Poor little Master Frankie! He's the only one o' the lot that's worth burying," replied Donnie, softening a little.

"He'll be here to-night, did you say?" said Winnie. "What a pity he didn't come yesterday. He *would* have enjoyed seeing the ceremony. Wouldn't he, Myrrh?"

"Yes," said Murtagh. "And isn't it a pity he can't ever come alone? As for the others—" An expressive shake of the head finished his sentence.

A few more hasty questions as to how and when the new comers were to arrive, and then the children's minds returned to the matter in hand.

"Never mind them now," cried Rosie; "let us get Nessa and Ellie, and be off."

"You are a jolly old Donnie!" said Murtagh; "and we're having such fun! Won't they all open their eyes just when they see what we've got for them!"

"It's lucky you've got the things, I can tell you, for of course Mr. Plunkett must walk in to tell me about this nice little treat of Mrs. William coming, and he couldn't choose any minute of the day but just when I'd got them all laid out here on the table. However, ye've got 'em now, so be off with you," she added laughing. "Here, Peggy, give me a hand with the hampers."

The hampers were heavy, but with assistance from Peggy and the children they were got safely into the cart. A chair was put in for Nessa to sit upon, then the cart was taken round in state to the hall door. Nessa and Ellie were handed in, and away Tommie started once more.

Nessa had not yet been among the hills, so she enjoyed the drive immensely, laughing like a child at the queer equipage and the jolts that threatened at every instant to upset both her and her chair. She was not prepared either for a sight of the sea, and Murtagh delighted in her admiration of it. As they drew nearer to the last turn in the road which hid the tower from their sight, the children's excitement became almost uncontrollable. They had invented an ingenious reason for leaving Nessa at a pretty little spot they knew of, just out of sight of the tower, in order that all might burst upon her as a surprise when they led her up to be crowned; but when they reached the place all their reasons went out of their heads, and they landed her and her chair with no further explanation than an imperious command to "stay here till we come, and be sure not to stir."

Nessa, who had long ago guessed that some wonderful mystery was on foot, merrily consented to stay just so long as it would take to make into bouquets all the flowers she could reach without going round the corner. "After that," she said, "if you keep me waiting I shall come and peep."

"No, no! Whatever you do you mustn't peep!" said the children. "We 'll be as quick as *ever* we can." And with happy, excited faces they ran forward, patient Tommie trotting after them.

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CHAPTER XVII.

AT the tower the followers were eagerly expecting the return of their little chiefs. While the children had been away they had rambled about under Pat O'Toole's direction, and had each brought a beautiful branch of mountain-ash, loaded with scarlet berries, to hold in their hands, and had gathered bunches of white heather. They had added, too, to the decorations by fixing branches of mountain-ash wherever one of the festoons was looped, and they were most anxious to know whether Rosie would approve their taste. She did heartily, and the broad, good-humored faces beamed with delight at her thanks.

Plenty of hands were ready to carry the hampers from the cart to the other side of the archway, but every one was too much excited just now about the ceremony to be able to think of anything else.

A white table-cloth was hastily thrown over the hampers, and the followers were told to wash their feet and hurry on their clean pinafores, which latter had been wisely put on one side in the early part of the day

Then Rosie said, with the branches in their hands they would all look "beautifully alike." But Ellie was to be the messenger who was to summon Nessa, and her shabby little dark green frock was far from suitable to such an occasion. Rosie looked at her in despair for a moment, but only for a moment.

"Quick, quick, Winnie, the needles and thread," she said; and then, while the followers assumed their primitive uniform, she and Winnie tacked a garland of white heather round the hem of the little frock, looped it up shepherdess fashion over the short scarlet linsey petticoat, and placed bunches of white heather on the breast and shoulders with such effect that when Murtagh crowned the child's golden head with a wreath of the same white flowers, Winnie cried in delight: "Oh, Ellie, you do look like a little fairy, so you do."

"All but the boots and stockings," returned Murtagh, surveying her with more critical eyes.

"Tate 'em off," said Ellie, eagerly holding up one foot. "Ellie want to be a fairy."

"The grass 'll prick," said Winnie. But Ellie, who had stood like a little statue while they decorated her dress, replied: "Me don't mind. Ellie be a fairy then, and look *so* pretty."

So they pulled off the clumsy boots, and she danced gleefully over the grass, her golden curls falling over her dimpled shoulders, her little white feet and legs twinkling in the sunlight.

"'Deed it's like an angel right down from heaven she is!" exclaimed more than one of the followers, while Rose, with all the anxiety of a manager, said: "Take care, Ellie; don't shake off your wreath. Now you're to come with us down to there, you see where Nessa is behind the rock, and you're to tell her —— What shall we say, Murtagh?"

"Tell her to come and be one of us," replied Murtagh grandiloquently, seating himself upon the throne as he spoke, and taking up his violin.

"You lead Ellie down, Rosie. All you followers follow, and as soon as Miss Nessa comes round the rock, form into two lines for her to pass through, and scatter your flowers. Now begin to sing."

He touched his violin. Winnie's clear voice rose first, then all the others joined in, and the music swelled in harmony as the little procession moved down the slope.

Notwithstanding the sunlight, the flowers, and the gay dresses of the children, there was a something almost solemn in their voices; and little Ellie looked up into Rosie's face with wide-open wondering eyes, as though not at all sure what all this meant.

"Now go," said Rosie, loosing the child's hand as the singing began gently to die away.

With flushed cheeks and the same wondering look still in her eyes Ellie sprang round the rock, and holding out her hand to Nessa she cried earnestly:

"Oor to tum and be a fairy." Then quivering all over with excitement, she added in a tone meant to be reassuring: "Ellie 's not frightened. It doesn' hurt."

"No, dear," replied Nessa, taking hold of the little hot hand and keeping it firmly in her own cool fingers. "Only fun for Nessa and Ellie together."

"Yes, *only* fun," said Ellie looking up at Nessa with a sigh of relief. But she clung very closely to Nessa's hand as they came out from behind the rock and were received with a cheer ending in a burst of music.

"How very, very pretty!" exclaimed Nessa, taking in the whole scene at a glance and standing still in admiration.

Almost opposite to them rose the grassy slope with the irregular double file of followers winding down its side. Through their ranks Nessa could see Murtagh sitting, playing his violin on the rough throne they had made. Behind rose the gray ruin wreathed in flowers, and above and beyond all, clear blue sky flecked with sunny clouds spread over the purple hill-tops as far as the eye could reach.

"Tum," said Ellie, pulling her hand; and through the singing children Nessa walked slowly towards the throne. But now little Ellie was not the only one who felt solemnity underlying the play. The children as they sang could not have told how much they were in earnest; their hearts were beating fast, they scarcely knew why, and there was a tone in their voices that filled Nessa with emotion as she passed between them. No one had intended the ceremony to be solemn; it became so without their will.

When Nessa was quite close the music ceased. Murtagh descended from his seat, and with the followers pressing eagerly round to see, Nessa was with due form received into the tribe, and the green ribbon was tied about her arm. Then came the moment for her to promise to hate the "Agents." It was the interesting point, the crisis as it were of the whole ceremony; and there was an almost breathless silence while Murtagh, his voice shaking a little with excitement, said to her: "Will you promise faithfully to hate the 'Agents,' and to defend your tribe against them?"

There was something so curious in this request, made as it was in the midst of those intensely eager faces, that Nessa felt not the slightest inclination to laugh. She looked round the listening circle with a sort of troubled astonishment, and then turning to Murtagh she answered quite gravely:

"No. I do not like hating."

A burst of expressive lament escaped from the crowd. Murtagh looked puzzled and disappointed. He could not make up his mind.

"What shall we do?" he asked at length, turning to the followers.

"Make her princess over us anyhow, Mr. Murtagh. It can't be helped," cried Pat O'Toole magnanimously, and the other followers by their acclamations seconded his request.

"Yes, do! yes, do!" cried Winnie, Bobbo, and Rosie.

Murtagh took the wreath of shamrocks and would have placed it on Nessa's head; but she drew back and said: "No; I do not think I can be your princess."

Murtagh paused with the wreath in his hands too much astonished to speak. Consternation became visible in every face; their ceremony was taking a most unexpected turn.

"Have you promised what you wanted me to promise?" asked Nessa.

"That we have; *sworn* it!" cried the children eagerly, regaining their voices.

"That was what I thought," said Nessa, beginning to unfasten the ribbon from her arm. "That is why I cannot be one of your tribe."

"Oh, stop a minute! stop a minute!" cried Rosie and the children, while Murtagh asked: "What do you want us to do?"

"I want you to undo the promise you have made, and to try never to hate any one," said Nessa resolutely, her cheeks flushing a little, and her eyes dark and bright. "Do you not feel wicked when you hate?"

There was a pause. This was very different from what they had intended, but for the moment Nessa had the little crowd in her power. Pat O'Toole was the first to speak.

"'Deed and she 's right," he exclaimed. "When my paddy 's up it 's little I care what I do."

"Faix, and it 's little good we get by hating them," remarked another of the elder followers.

But to Murtagh himself the question was a more personal one. He was thinking deeply, and seemed at first quite undecided. Then, his whole countenance opening out into a sunny smile, he turned to Nessa and said, "I 'll try."

That was all that was needed.

"So will I," said Winnie; and more or less earnestly the promise was echoed by the crowd.

"Then I will be your princess if you will have me," said Nessa. "And shall I give you a *device*, — a motto for the tribe?" she added, hesitating.

"Yes, yes," cried Murtagh. "What is it?"

"'Peace on earth, goodwill towards men.' Will you have that?"

She looked round with a gentle pleading in her eyes, and then taking off her hat she knelt down on the grass before Murtagh.

"God bless her! God bless her!" cried the followers, and Murtagh's face was white, and his hands trembling a little, as he laid the wreath upon her head.

A chorus of cheers rose from the followers' lusty throats, and in the midst of the echoing hurrahs Murtagh led her up the steps of the throne. The excitement of the children had been growing greater and greater from the moment that Ellie first led Nessa round the rock. During the ceremony they had been obliged to keep it down, but now it burst forth without restraint.

They danced and shouted round the throne like mad creatures, and the more they danced the wilder they grew; each seemed to try and outrival the others in the noise. At last Murtagh, remembering his violin, struck the first notes of the "Shan van Vaugh," and every one found relief in spending upon that the force of their lungs. How they did sing! Their voices rang through the mountain-rocks and were echoed back again. The excitement was infectious; even little Ellie, standing on the throne beside Nessa, sang diligently all the time the only words she knew: "Says de Shan van Vaugh; says de Shan van Vaugh;" and when with a last triumphant burst came the ending lines:

"We'll pluck the laurel tree,
And we'll call it Liberty,
For our country *shall* be free,
Says the Shan van Vaugh"—

Nessa clapped her hands and cried in delight: "Oh, how pretty it is out of doors! How pretty it all is!"

Almost as she did so a strange voice exclaimed: "Well, children, are you holding a Fenian meeting?" The words were accompanied by a little laugh, but they had the effect of putting a sudden and complete stop to the children's mirth.

Nessa looked round, and standing by the low wall she perceived a lady, who at the moment was engaged in disentangling a floating gauze veil from among the bows and flowers that adorned her bonnet. By her side stood a fashionably-dressed girl of sixteen, whose face wore an expression of amused contempt far from attractive. She did not seem to be aware of the elder lady's difficulties with the veil, and Nessa advanced at once to offer her assistance.

"Or have you quite given up civilized life," continued the lady, with a series of little laughs, "and resolved to live up here with your select circle of friends? I thought you were to have some one to take care of you. How do you get on with the new cousin; eh, Murtagh? Oh, I'm sure I beg your pardon," she added, suddenly perceiving Nessa, and making up for her first oversight by a fixed and deliberate stare.

The color deepened in Nessa's cheeks as she bowed and asked whether she could not help to disengage the veil. But the new-comer continued none the less for that as she bent her head to Nessa's ministrations:

"So you have a new playfellow, children. That must be very nice for you. You have good strong nerves I suppose, and don't mind noise," she added, addressing Nessa. "Well, you are quite right; it's no good having delicate ways and ideas when you have to live with a big family. Those things do well enough where there's only one or two."

At this point Murtagh seemed to think that she had monopolized the conversation long enough, for he now walked up to her, and holding out his hand said gravely:

"How do you do, Cousin Jane? How do you do, Emma?"

The three other children followed his example with automatic regularity, and no social extinguisher could have been more effective. Cousin Jane was completely silenced.

"It is no use our staying here any longer, mamma," exclaimed Emma. "We shall see them all when they are quiet and tidy in the house this evening. We could not imagine," she said, turning politely to Nessa, "what all the noise was. That is why we came up; we left the carriage in the road."

"It is a birthday," said Nessa, smiling as she glanced at the groups of followers, "and we are *en grande fête.*"

"We 've got a jolly good feast for them too," said Bobbo confidentially.

"A feast, have you?" exclaimed Cousin Jane. "Oh well, there 's a lot of fruit and some lollypops and cakes in the carriage. You 'd like them now I daresay as well as any other time; you can make a division. Here, you little fellow," she continued, turning to one of the followers; "do you know how to eat sweeties?"

The little girl addressed put her finger sheepishly in her mouth, and Cousin Jane pulled out of her pocket a large paper of sweeties, which she proceeded good-humoredly to distribute, while Emma turning to Nessa asked if such a noise did not make her head ache?

"No!" said Nessa, "it amused me very much."

"And I daresay you 've been accustomed to it," added Cousin Jane. "But I wonder what Ma'mselle would say to such lessons; eh, Emma?"

Emma laughed contemptuously, and Cousin Jane dropping her voice to a confidential tone continued: "You know I 'm the only lady they have to look after them at all, so we must have some talks about them. It is quite terrible the way poor Mr. Blair forgets his responsibility. It always has been the way with him; the idea of allowing them to come up here with that pack of dirty children. Nobody in the world but John would do such a thing. And just fancy not having got another governess for them yet, when their last went away more than three months ago. But he 's so wrapped up in books, and stones, and pictures, he puts all his duties on one side. If it wasn't for Mr. Plunkett I don't know what would become of the place; that man is the salvation of the estate."

This seemed a fruitful subject to Cousin Jane, for she continued to talk without interruption till the carriage was reached.

Nessa, quite taken aback by the sudden confidence, found nothing to say, and was only glad that the children had careered on in front. Frankie was not in the carriage; he had preferred to drive in the dog-cart with a servant; so it was the affair of a few minutes only to find the basket Cousin Jane destined for the children; and then, somewhat it must be confessed to the relief of every one, the carriage drove on towards Castle Blair.

"Wait till you see Frankie," said Murtagh, turning towards Nessa as the carriage disappeared round the corner. "*He's* not a bit like that."

"I say, Murtagh," called Bobbo from the stream at the other side of the slope where he and Winnie were already disporting themselves, "come and wash your hands, and let us see about unpacking the grub." A hatful of water flung after the invitation proved irresistible; in another minute Murtagh was taking his revenge, and water was flying in every direction.

Suddenly in the midst of the fun a splendid Newfoundland dog bounded through the hedge and over the little stream, fairly upsetting Winnie, and splashing the water over them all.

"In the name of all that's wonderful where do you come from?" exclaimed Murtagh, as Winnie, picking herself up, rushed after the dog, crying: "Oh, you beauty! come here."

A low rippling laugh made both Nessa and Murtagh look round, and in a dog-cart on the other side of the hedge they saw a delicate-looking little boy sitting watching Winnie with delight.

"Frankie!" exclaimed Murtagh springing forward.

"Yes," said Frankie. "How do you do? What are you doing? Was it you making that jolly noise? Have you heard why we've come here? There is such a splendid plan. The doctors say I am to go to the seaside somewhere in the south, and some of you are to come."

Murtagh was busy climbing through the hedge and into the dog-cart, so he scarcely heard what Frankie was saying, but now took his place beside him exclaiming: "How are you, old fellow? Are you any better? Where did you get him? He is such a beauty!" The last words referred, of course, to the dog, whom Winnie had caught, and was now leading back to the stream.

The flush of excitement faded from Frankie's cheek, and he seemed to have some difficulty in getting his breath after the volley of questions he had poured out. In reply to the first part of Murtagh's inquiries he only seemed to shrink into himself, and shook his head. The servant who accompanied him began to assure Murtagh that Mr. Frank was much better, and would soon be quite well now; but Frankie seemed to wish to change the subject, and said hurriedly: "Yes, isn't he splendid! He was given to me, but I 've been training him for Winnie. He 's no good to me, you know; if he knocks me over I don't get my breath back for a week. But I thought she 'd like him. He 's as quiet as a lamb unless you set him at anybody, and then he goes at them like —"

"Like an Irishman," suggested Murtagh; but though his words were meant for a joke he looked wistfully at his cousin, wishing to ask more questions about his health. He was very fond of Frankie, and it made him sorry to see the sunken cheeks and wasted hands that told even to childish eyes how ill the boy was.

Frankie nodded and sat silently looking at Winnie and the dog with a pleased smile playing round his mouth.

Winnie had not yet perceived him, and her attention was entirely absorbed by the dog. Both her arms were round its neck, and as she walked along by its side, bending down, she showered upon it every endearing epithet she could think of.

"Perhaps you 're lost, and perhaps we won't be able to find your master, however hard we look, and then you 'll stay with us; won't you, my beauty?" she was saying when she glanced up and saw Frankie.

Instantly the dog was forgotten, and she flew towards the road, exclaiming: "Frankie! How jolly!"

Frankie laughed again his low, pleased laugh; but having suffered for the rapid questions with which he had saluted Murtagh, he did not attempt to say more than, "Yes; here I am," as Winnie climbed up on the wheel of the dog-cart and pulled down his face to be kissed.

"We 're having such fun!" she continued; "get down, and come up to the tower with us." She jumped down herself as she spoke, and threw her arms round the dog, who stood wagging his tail.

"No, I mustn't do that," replied Frankie, looking wistfully at the tower and then smiling again as his eyes fell to the dog standing by Winnie's side. "I only stopped to see what you 'd think of Royal."

"You don't mean to say that this beautiful dog is yours!" exclaimed Winnie. "Oh, Frankie, you are a lucky boy!"

"Yes it is," said Murtagh.

"Your very, very own; not your mother's or anybody's?" inquired Winnie, doubtful whether it were possible for any child to possess such a treasure.

"No," said Frankie: "he isn't mine, he is yours."

"Wha—what do you mean?" asked Winnie astonished, the color deepening a little in her cheeks as the dream-like possibility flashed across her mind.

"I mean what I say," repeated Frankie, his face beaming. "He is your very own dog; I have been training him for you, and I 've brought him here for you!"

Winnie did not seem able to take it in. The color spread over her cheeks and mounted to her forehead. Her big eyes grew round and bigger, but she did not dare to believe such a thing could be till Murtagh exclaimed:

"Frankie 's given him to you. He 's your very own, as own as own can be!"

Then a light broke over her face, and tightening the grasp of her arms round Royal's neck she half-strangled him in an embrace, while all she could say was, "Oh, Frankie!"

Frankie seemed well satisfied with her thanks.

Murtagh laughed and said: "She doesn't believe it now."

"Yes, I do," said Winnie, "only it's too good! I can't seem to know it. Oh, Frankie, I think I shall go cracky with gladness!" Suddenly finding the power of expressing her delight she tore up the hill, calling to Royal to follow, and burst upon the assembled children, exclaiming: "He's mine! He's my very own! Frankie's just given him to me!" Then she raced down again like some mad thing, and ran away at full speed over the heather with Royal at her heels. She came back in about five minutes panting and rosy, with her hand upon the dog's collar, declaring that now she could stay quiet; and her brilliant face would have been reward enough for a more selfish person than Frankie.

Frankie stayed only to display some of Royal's accomplishments and to show Winnie's name engraved upon the collar. Then he drove away, leaving their new treasure with the children.

But it was getting to be quite afternoon by this time, and nobody had had any dinner yet, so Murtagh careered up the hill, crying: "Come along now, and let's have scene number two in the entertainment. I feel as if I was quite ready for scene number two. How are you, Winnie?"

Winnie's answer was more expressive than elegant, and then they set to work to unpack the hampers. In a very few moments the white cloth was spread upon the ground and covered with Mrs. Donegan's dainties. The children were in no way disappointed in the pleasure of watching the queer expressions of the followers' faces as dish after dish came out of the hampers. Poor hungry followers! they had had nothing to eat since an early hour that morning, and few of them had ever even seen such things as Mrs. Donegan had prepared. So it is not to be wondered at, that when they found themselves sitting on the grass round that wonderful feast, with free leave to eat whatever they pleased, the event seemed to them really too good to be true.

Winnie was in ecstacy over their pleasure. At first they were too shy to help themselves to anything, but she jumped up and had soon piled some of their plates. Rosie and the boys did the same, and the followers quickly recovered themselves sufficiently to talk, and eat, and laugh.

"Now, whatever more you want you must really help yourselves," cried Murtagh, returning to his place after having gone once round. "I 'm so starving that if I don't get something soon I shall eat one of you."

Royal had waited like a perfect gentleman, as he was, till all were helped; but now he gravely poked his black muzzle into Winnie's hand in a manner that said as plainly as any words, "Give me a little cold pie, if you please." He had not to ask twice. Winnie gave him a great plateful of miscellaneous food, and as on the fast emptying plates there began to appear all manner of suitable scraps, a constant cry of, "Here, Royal! Royal!" kept him racing round the tablecloth. One little girl wished to be very polite, and as he was Winnie's dog thought it better to call him Master Royal. That made the others ashamed of their bad manners, but they soon corrected themselves, and from that day forth he was Master Royal to the followers.

At first there was not very much talking, for all were so hungry they were glad to eat. But when once the edge was taken off their appetites the Irish tongues got loose; and then they chattered, they laughed, they sang snatches of songs, they drank healths in water, and made mock speeches each more ludicrous than the last, till everybody was half-incapacitated with laughter. Murtagh was the soul of the party. Nessa wondered where his words and ideas came from, they flowed out so fast. Seated in state at the head of the table she was very gay and happy. She was unusually amused by this wild merry crew, and such spirits as theirs were infectious.

The feast over, Royal was with much mock solemnity received into the tribe, a ceremony which he disrespectfully brought to an abrupt ending by knocking over four or five of his sponsors. They then divided into parties, and played robber games among the hills, till the fading light warned them that even the pleasantest of days *will* come to an end. The remains of the feast were divided between the followers. Tommie was yoked into the cart again, and at last to his satisfaction, if to nobody else's, his willing head was turned homewards.

But even then the children were not tired. It was wonderful to see how they caracoled round the cart, and sang and laughed the whole way home; and when, finally, they drove up in state and deposited Nessa upon the hall-door steps, the last cheer they gave her was as hearty as any they had uttered that day.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHILE the "tribe" trotted off in just the same wild spirits to return the cart and horse, Nessa entered the house with a sudden and not pleasant recollection that Cousin Jane was there, and would have to be talked to all the evening.

There was scarcely time to do more than dress for dinner, but she went to the school-room as usual before going up stairs to see if the curtains were drawn and the fire bright for the children. To her dismay she found it full of people. Cousin Jane was sitting by the fire talking to Mr. Plunkett. Emma had taken down some of the lesson-books from the bookcase, and was showing them to Mademoiselle; Frankie, looking tired and excited, was curled up in an arm-chair by the window.

"Well, you see we have lost no time," exclaimed Cousin Jane as Nessa entered. "I found Mr. Plunkett, and I have just been talking to him about those children. For poor Launcelot's sake it really goes to my heart to see the state they are in. To think of children of their family and position being allowed to run wild with little beggars and vagabonds! It is quite unheard-of. I have been telling Mr. Plunkett he should keep them a little more strictly. If it were known what associates they have it would be very unpleasant for Emma. But it's always the way when there 's no lady in the house to look after things. Don 't be offended, my dear," she added, with a little laugh. "You are young, you know; and besides, of course, it doesn't concern you."

Nessa felt very sorry for the children. What Cousin Jane said was perfectly true, it was time for some one to look after them; but instinctively Nessa felt that Cousin Jane and Mr. Plunkett together were likely to prove worse than no one.

"Have they returned from their expedition?" inquired Mr. Plunkett.

"Yes; they have gone to take back the horse and the cart to the stable," replied Nessa innocently.

"I will go to them at once," said Mr. Plunkett, turning to Cousin Jane, "and hear what they mean by taking the horse and cart without my permission; and I will make that ragamuffin crew of theirs clearly understand for the future that if they are found trespassing on these grounds they will be taken up. That will, I think, be the best means of carrying out your wishes. And, indeed, believe me, you cannot feel more strongly than I do the necessity of breaking off the undesirable friendships that exist between these children and the little vagabonds of the village. Something should be done. I feel unfortunately my personal authority to be so vague that I hesitate to act alone, but armed with your permission there are several steps which I should like to take."

Mr. Plunkett had evidently had a long talk with Cousin Jane, and seemed to have thawed a little under the influence of her sympathy

"We must talk it all over," replied Cousin Jane. "If they are to spend months at the sea with Frankie they must mend their ways. They will find they can't have twenty or thirty dirty followers hanging about my house."

"I feel assured," said Mr. Plunkett, "that stricter measures are necessary, and separated from their disreputable associates you will find that much can be effected."

"I 'm sure I don't know what is to be done," said Cousin Jane, with a helpless sort of expression. "All I know is that I should be ashamed for any of our friends to know that there are such children in the family."

"Well, I will go now and have an explanation of their present conduct," returned Mr. Plunkett, moving towards the door.

"Oh, Mr. Plunkett, not now!" exclaimed Nessa, who did not like to interfere, but who pictured to herself only too clearly the kind of scene likely to ensue were he to meet the children in their present state of wild spirits. "They are all so excited now," she added, turning to Cousin Jane, "and when they are excited they say — they do not know what they say — Will you not wait till to-morrow?"

"I 'm sure I don 't know, my dear; I never had to do with children like these. Let Mr. Plunkett do as he likes."

Mr. Plunkett had stood with his hand on the door while Nessa spoke, but as Cousin Jane answered for him he merely bowed, said a general "Good-evening," and left the room.

He knew the children would be in the haggart, and he walked briskly in that direction. For a minute or two he had debated in his mind whether perhaps it would not be better to leave the matter, as Nessa suggested, till the next day. But he had quickly decided to keep to his own plan. Murtagh's spirit required to be broken. He ought to be humiliated, to be shown that his independent ways could not be tolerated. Nothing short of that would reduce him to submission, and how would he ever learn to bear the discipline of life if he were not taught now to obey? "I am the only person who is in any sort of authority over him," thought Mr. Plunkett, "and if the boy will defy me in this open manner I must show him openly that I am stronger than he."

No better opportunity than this would be likely to present itself for a long time. Murtagh had doubtless boasted before all those children how little he cared whether they took the cart with or without leave, and had probably told how nearly they had been prevented from holding their festival. Mr. Plunkett imagined him laughing over his victory, and that thought decided the matter. He would speak to Murtagh before the whole crew, and he would make the village children understand for their part that he would not have them hanging about the place. His position in the village as well as in the immediate household was affected; and in defence of his own authority it was absolutely necessary for him to speak at once, and show that he was not to be trifled with.

In this frame of mind he arrived within earshot of the haggart. Scraps of song, shouts, and laughter, reached him from time to time; some piece of fun was evidently going on.

The sound of the merriment only strengthened his resolution, and his anger was in no way abated when he stood at the gate of the haggart by seeing Murtagh and Winnie with stable lanterns in their hands standing up together on Tommie's back. They were performing some kind of circus entertainment for the amusement of the assembled crowd; and Royal, as much excited as the children, was apparently endeavoring to leap on the horse's back.

They had collected a quantity of straw lying about the haggart, and had spread it upon the ground in order that they might "fall soft," but at the first glance Mr.

Plunkett imagined that they had knocked down part of a corn-rick for the purpose, and he advanced at once toward Murtagh, saying sternly:

"Stop this tomfoolery, sir, and tell me what you mean by destroying your uncle's property in this wanton manner!"

"Destroy my uncle's granny fiddlesticks!" retorted Winnie with a merry peal of laughter. "We 're not destroying anything except our own bones. Look out, Murtagh, I 'm slipping again." As she spoke she slipped to a sitting position, but Murtagh remained standing, and steadied himself against her shoulder while a smothered laugh burst from the crowd, and one incautious — "It 's like his impudence," was distinctly heard.

"I tell you what it is, young gentleman," returned Mr. Plunkett, now thoroughly angry, "your disobedience and impertinence have gone on too long. I am tired of bearing with you, and I will do it no longer. It is time such behavior was stopped, and stopped it shall be in one way or another. Were you aware when you took that horse and the cart to-day that I had given orders for them to be employed elsewhere?"

Murtagh surveyed Mr Plunkett for a minute from his vantage ground on the back of the horse, and then replied coolly:

"Perfectly aware."

Again an irritating titter ran through the crowd, and Mr. Plunkett answered hotly:

"Let me tell you, then, that for the future when you are aware of my commands you will be wise if you obey them. I have forgiven you often enough, and henceforth every disobedience shall be punished as it deserves. Little boys seldom gain much by setting themselves up in rebellion against their elders."

He paused. Murtagh's face had grown blacker, but he only twirled a straw between his lips, and without speaking looked straight at Mr. Plunkett.

Dead silence reigned for a minute, then Winnie gave a provoking little laugh. Her face was as distinctly visible as Murtagh's, for her lantern rested upon her knee; her eyes were sparkling, her mouth ready to break again into laughter; and as she sat there upon the horse's back, swinging her legs, she seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the scene. She was too much excited to be angry.

At the sound of her laughter Mr. Plunkett continued:

"But I should have thought that even you would have known better than to drag your sisters into such companionship as this."

He pointed as he spoke to the crowd of followers. "If you choose to pick your own companions from among the rabble of the village, you might at least have sufficient gentlemanly feeling to induce you to shield your sisters from the like associates."

"Well, you are polite," laughed Winnie, while Murtagh replied with an angry tone in his voice:

"Don't talk about my friends at all, if you please, unless you can talk more civilly."

"Friends!" returned Mr. Plunkett. "They are certainly charming friends for a young gentleman of your position! But till you learn to choose your society from a different rank you must hold your entertainments somewhere else. For I give you all fair warning," he continued, turning to the troop of children, "that the next time I catch one of you hanging about here I send you off to prison for trespassing."

"You shall do nothing of the sort," retorted Murtagh. "They *are* my friends; real, true friends, who love me, and who would do anything I told them to. Aren't you?" he added, appealing to the followers.

"That are we so!" they cried with one voice, while Murtagh continued:

"I am proud of them; they are honest and real. They love me, and I love them. What do we care about positions? They shall come here when they please, and you are not to insult them."

He drew his figure up to its full height, and delivered the last words with authority. They were received with a hearty shout by the excited followers; and as soon as Mr. Plunkett's voice could be heard above the noise, he replied with some irritation:

"Don't talk to me in such a ridiculous manner, sir. I shall do whatever seems to me to be proper; and I am not joking about this matter. If I ever again find such a dirty, disreputable crowd assembled on your uncle's premises, every member of it shall be taken up for trespassing. Whether you are invited by Mr. Murtagh, or whether you are not," he added, turning again to the crowd. "And further, unless you wish me to call a policeman now, you had better go away to your homes as fast as you can."

The followers huddled silently together not knowing what to do, but Murtagh burst out angrily:

"How dare you? Do you know what you are doing? Do you know that if I chose to tell them they would take you and duck you in the stable pond."

At the words there ran through the crowd an eager movement which made Mr. Plunkett remember thankfully that he had on one of his oldest coats. Twenty to one were unfair odds, and some of the twenty were strongly-built boys; however, he answered coldly:

"When you speak to me in such a manner I think you forget the difference of age between us, and the position in which I stand towards you. Such unseemly outbursts only serve to prove that the society you have chosen is not likely to fit you for the career of a gentleman, and leave me no alternative but to take by force the obedience you will not render willingly. I give you two minutes to clear this haggart. If it is not empty at the end of that time you and your sisters shall be taken home, and I will settle the matter my own way with this rabble."

As it happened two of the night police walked up to the gate while he was speaking and looked into the yard. Mr. Plunkett signed to them to enter, and continued significantly: "You see my words are not vain I mean what I say. Choose your own course."

Murtagh saw that he was overpowered; he had no choice but to obey. The sense of being baffled and defeated by mere armed force was very bitter, and all the roused passion within him burst forth as he answered:

"Yes; you have conquered this time because you have got grown-up men to help you, and they are stronger than us. But you shall see I *will* be free. If you fight with me you will get the worst of it. I will receive my friends wherever I please, and you had better not dare to interfere with me again. I tell you when you do it it makes me feel as if I could kill you."

"That 's right, Mr. Murtagh; an' it would be a good riddance to the country the day ye did it," shouted hot-headed Pat O'Toole, who could no longer contain his indignation.

Almost before the words were out of the boy's mouth Mr. Plunkett's hand was on his collar, and some sharp blows from Mr. Plunkett's cane repaid the speech. An angry murmur ran through the crowd. Murtagh sprang from the horse's back and threw himself between them, receiving upon his face and head a part of the swiftly-descending shower of blows. For a moment there was a confused struggle. Bobbo tried to make his way to the rescue. Winnie had risen to her feet, and with flashing eyes she called: "At him, Royal; at him!"

The great dog bounded forward, seized Mr. Plunkett's coat-sleeve in his teeth, and the next minute Murtagh and Pat were standing side by side defiantly facing Mr. Plunkett.

Murtagh's face was even whiter than usual, and across one cheek a dark red stripe showed where the cane had struck him.

"Come," he said, turning to the tribe. He led the way to the gate, and they followed him slowly, the dog holding Mr. Plunkett immovable the while.

Only Pat O'Toole did not stir. He stood facing Mr. Plunkett. From the gate Murtagh called to him. Then he turned and followed the others, but before leaving the yard he stopped, and shaking his fist at Mr. Plunkett, he exclaimed passionately:

"You shall repent this evening's work; ye haven't struck Pat O'Toole for nothing."

"Come, Royal; loose him, good dog!" cried Winnie. The dog trotted after them, and the whole troop of children disappeared into the darkness.

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CHAPTER XIX.

THAT evening Cousin Jane's proposal to take Winnie and Murtagh with her to the south of England was discussed, and of course accepted. She intended to spend a few days at Castle Blair, and to start on the first of November.

Frankie was in a state of exceeding delight at the prospect, and was eager to talk over the plan with his little cousins. But the bright red spots upon his cheeks and the feverish brilliancy of his eyes, drew many anxious glances from his mother, and she coaxed him not to wait up for them. "Every one was tired with traveling," she said; so the drawing-room party dispersed at an early hour.

Nessa was glad to be free, for though every one else had completely forgotten the children's immediate concerns, she was anxiously wondering what had been the result of their interview with Mr. Plunkett. She went at once to the school-room and found that the children had come in. They had had their tea. Rosie and Bobbo were lolling by the fire discussing the events of the day. Royal was lying curled up on the hearth-rug, and Winnie had made a pillow of his body, but she was silent. Murtagh was at the piano composing a battle piece.

He ceased as Nessa entered, and threw himself into his favorite position on the floor near her chair.

"Have you seen Mr. Plunkett?" she asked.

"Yes," said Murtagh in a tone that meant he was not going to say any more.

"And he was just as impudent as usual," added Winnie, sitting up as she spoke, and pushing back her hair. "But he got the worst of it this time, thanks to Royal."

"Oh, Winnie, what have you done?" asked Nessa.

"Well, we were only amusing ourselves and not hurting anybody, and he came up and began worrying as usual," returned Winnie, somewhat defiantly answering the tone of Nessa's voice. "And besides, he had no business to talk like that before all the followers."

Murtagh's face softened a little as he looked at Nessa's. "Tell her just what we did if she wants to know," he said.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Winnie. "What *is* the good of going all over it again? I 'm sure he 's bad enough when he 's here without bothering about him when he 's not here."

"Well, but it served him right," said Bobbo; "I only just wish Royal had given him a good bite." And beginning at the beginning Winnie told the whole story as nearly as possible as it happened, neither exaggerating nor omitting anything. Murtagh watched Nessa's face in the mean while to see what she thought of it. She did not look at him, and she listened in perfect silence till Winnie ended her recital.

"Oh, I am so sorry," she said; then looking round to Murtagh, "so very, very sorry. How could you do it?"

"Why shouldn't we do it?" asked Winnie. "He had no business to talk to us like that."

"You will only make him more and more angry with you now," said Nessa regretfully. "And then," she added, "it is wrong; it is very wrong; you must not be angry with me for telling you so, for it is only true, and makes me so sorry."

The children were silent for a moment, and then Murtagh said:

"But I can't help it. He puts me in such a rage."

"Yes," said Nessa, "but I will tell you honestly what I think. I think you ought not to let yourself be put so easily in a rage. It is not worthy of you; you could do better than that. Listen, what you have done to-day. When we were on the mountain you promised to try to be gentle and kind. You promised all together — the whole tribe — but you were the chief. And the chief ought to watch over his followers, oughtn't he? He ought to see that they keep their promises, and he ought to try to keep them out of trouble. But you did not do that; you came down from the mountain where you promised, and you broke the promise yourself, and you made all the others break it too. Now Mr. Plunkett will be angry with them all, and Pat O'Toole will be in trouble."

The defiant look faded out of Winnie's face, and Murtagh looked abashed as for the first time he remembered the promise he had made that morning.

"I quite forgot," he murmured.

"I did not think you would have forgotten so soon," said Nessa.

That quiet reproach was more bitter to Murtagh than any scolding.

"I did not mean to," he said; "I did mean to remember it always; always. But he makes me forget everything. Oh, how I hate him!"

The last words burst out passionately, and he knelt upon the hearth-rug with flashing eyes.

"I don't think that's having 'Peace and goodwill,'" remarked Rosie.

"I *can't* help it," said Murtagh in despair, looking up at Nessa; "that's just how it always comes. But I will do anything you tell me. I will — beg his pardon if you like, because I was in earnest. I did mean to remember."

"Oh, Myrrh!" remonstrated Winnie, who thought that his repentance was really carrying him beyond all reasonable bounds.

Nessa looked at him compassionately. She had never hated any one in her life, but she had often loved, and she felt as if she loved Murtagh very much just then in spite of all his faults.

"Poor Murtagh!" she said. "Perhaps it will not always be so difficult."

Murtagh looked at her with a sad wistful expression for a moment, and then he quietly dropped back again into the dark corner beside her chair.

No one spoke for a minute or two. Then Winnie returned to the subject that seemed to have disturbed her. "But you don't want Murtagh to beg his pardon, do you?" she said. "Because you know he couldn't really, of course."

"Yes, I can," came in a low resolute voice from Murtagh's corner.

"Can you? Can you really?" asked Nessa. To tell the truth she would not have liked to do it herself.

Bobbo and Rosie looked with eager curiosity towards Murtagh. They could not believe he was in earnest. But Winnie burst out again before he had time to answer: "Myrrh, you can't! You don't know what you're saying. Go and beg his pardon! That old scurmudgeon, who has always worried us from the very first day we came here!"

No words can convey the opprobrium that Winnie contrived to throw into her pronunciation of curmudgeon; the one letter she added to it expressed more than a whole volume of epithets. Murtagh's answer did not come at once, but after a moment's silence he said steadily: "Yes, I am almost sure I can."

"If you can," said Nessa, "it is the very best thing you could do. Because," she continued, seeing Winnie ready to burst out again, "it is not only for you, it is for your friend Pat. Uncle Blair has told me such dreadful things of the people about here. And perhaps it is very foolish of me, but Pat is a big boy, and if he does not forgive Mr. Plunkett he might really try to be revenged and then if — if anything dreadful happened, it would be your fault too."

That was the first idea that had occurred to Nessa on hearing of Pat's threat. She had been so much impressed by all that she had seen and heard since her arrival that she could not help feeling as though they were living in the midst of barbarians, and she constantly dreaded some fresh disaster.

"If Murtagh does it I'll do it too," said Winnie, reflectively. "I'm not going to let him do it alone. But I don't think we can, all the same."

The next morning, however, just as Nessa had finished dressing, there came a knock at her door, and Murtagh and Winnie entered.

"We've come to tell you," said Murtagh, "that we will do what we said."

"Oh! I am so glad!" she cried joyfully. Then as she kissed them, she added, "Good morning; I think it is very good of you."

"Then after, I'll go and find Pat and make him apologize too," said Murtagh.

"Yes do," said Nessa, greatly relieved, for her night's reflection had not in the least diminished her nervous fears. At that moment the breakfast-bell ringing loudly summoned them to the dining-room, and in the corridor they were met by Cousin Jane. Her arms were full of presents that she had brought for them all, and while she was displaying them Frankie came out of his room. He began eagerly to tell of the seaside plan; the children were perfectly delighted at the prospect, Cousin Jane was pleased with their pleasure, and they were all entering the dining-room in a merry mood, when Brown, with a solemn face, informed Murtagh that Mr. Blair desired he would step into the study.

"What's up? What's the matter?" cried Murtagh and Frankie together, and Cousin Jane also asked, "Has anything happened, Brown?"

"Yes, Madam," returned Brown, who evidently desired nothing better than to tell the news. "The Red House was set fire to last night, and one of the children, they say, nearly killed. The flames were put out quickly, and this is the first we 've heard of it up at the house. But it was no accident, Ma 'am. It began in the hay-yard, and when the flames burst out Mrs. Plunkett jumped out of bed to see what it was, and there was a boy"—here Brown hesitated a little and glanced at Murtagh—"about as big as Master Murtagh, standing in the road, but the minute she came to the window he turned and ran."

A smothered exclamation from Murtagh caused them all to glance at him. He and Winnie were looking at each other in dismay; the same thought was in both their minds. "Had Pat already taken his revenge? If he had it was all their fault." For the first moment they were too much startled to think of anything else; the next, they had remembered that if it were one of their followers they must at least do their best to prevent suspicion falling upon him. Murtagh tried to recover himself; Winnie slipped her hand into his, and endeavored also to look unconcerned. But Mr. Plunkett could not have chosen a worse moment to make his appearance.

Before any one else could speak his voice was heard, strangely hollow, and yet more stern than usual, saying: "Be so kind as to come this way at once, sir."

Winnie did not let go Murtagh's hand as he entered the study. Cousin Jane's curiosity was aroused, and she made no scruple of pressing in with Frankie, so Nessa entered with the rest.

Mrs. Plunkett was there. Mr. Blair was sitting by the writing-table, looking graver than Nessa had ever seen him. He seemed not to see any one but Murtagh and Winnie. As they approached his chair he fixed his eyes upon Murtagh, and said:

"Tell me, Murtagh, all that you know about the burning of the Red House."

Murtagh was still very white, but he answered straightforwardly:

"I do not know anything at all except what Brown has just told us."

"What did he tell you?" inquired Mr. Blair.

"That Mr. Plunkett's haggart was burnt, and the fire spread to the house, and one of the children was hurt, and —" But here Murtagh's voice faltered and he stopped.

Cousin Jane began to have an inkling of what was the matter.

"Tell the truth, Murtagh," she exclaimed. "What else did he tell you?"

Murtagh glanced at Mr. Blair in hopes that he was satisfied, but his face wore an expression of stern expectancy that compelled Murtagh to continue. "And," he said, "that when Mrs. Plunkett looked out of the window she saw a boy standing in the road."

"And did he tell you nothing else?" inquired Mr. Blair.

"No," said Murtagh, beginning to feel really puzzled at his uncle's strange manner.

"He did not tell you who that boy was," continued Mr. Blair.

"No," exclaimed Murtagh with eager interest. Perhaps it was not one of his followers; perhaps he had been frightening himself without a cause after all.

His uncle looked at him for a moment, and then answered:

"Murtagh," it is useless to keep up this deception any longer. Mrs. Plunkett says *you* are the boy she saw."

Murtagh's nerves were already strained, and for one instant he was completely overcome by so unexpected an accusation. The color rushed to his cheeks, and his eyes filled with tears; but in a moment he was himself again, and raising his head proudly, he replied:

"Mrs. Plunkett is mistaken. I was not there, and I know nothing whatever about the fire."

Then he turned and would have left the room as was his fashion when offended with Mr. Plunkett. But his uncle said· "Stay Murtagh, this is a very serious mat ter, and it is better for you to hear all the evidence against you." There was a kinder tone now, however, in Mr. Blair's voice, and the proud look died a little out of Murtagh's face as he again took up his place by the corner of his uncle's table.

Mr. Blair paused, and while the silence lasted Murtagh's eyes sought Nessa's. She had been watching him during the whole scene, and now such a look of trust and encouragement beamed upon him that for a moment he almost forgot his trouble in the pleasure of receiving it.

"Mrs. Plunkett," said Mr. Blair at length, "will you be so kind as to tell us now exactly what you saw when the flames first wakened you?"

"I saw just what I told you," began Mrs. Plunkett in her nervous hurried manner; "the haggart all in flames, and on the road where the flames were, Murtagh was standing. You know you were, Murtagh. It 's no use denying it; you had on that very gray jacket you have on now, and when you saw me you turned and ran away as fast as you could. And then I woke Mr. Plunkett," she continued, turning to Mr. Blair; "and all the servants, and he went down to see what could be done, and out on the road he found this; but perhaps Murtagh will deny that this is his name." As she spoke she took up a dirty pocket-handkerchief which lay on the table beside Mr. Blair, and showed "Murtagh Blair" written in clear letters in one of its corners.

At Mrs. Plunkett's mention of the gray jacket Winnie and Murtagh mechanically turned their eyes to Murtagh's coat, and as they did so a remembrance suddenly flashed across them that yesterday Pat O'Toole had worn a gray jacket which was not at all unlike Murtagh's. Each looked at the other; the truth was becoming too clear to be doubted any longer; and the sight of the handkerchief only confirmed their fears. It had been used as a towel yesterday by the followers, and had probably remained in Pat's pocket. Murtagh saw that Winnie had no longer any doubt, and the knowledge of her conviction made his own only the more certain.

What was to be done? It was all his temper that had brought Pat into this scrape, and now every word he said in his own defence would be a means of preventing the boy from escaping the consequences. Escape he should, Murtagh was resolved upon that. He did not know the exact punishment for the burning of hay-ricks, but he had heard such accidents talked of often enough to know that they meant at the very least prison and disgrace for the offender. To shield Pat now was all that he could do. And yet he had to fight hard with the proud indignation stirred up in him by being falsely accused. It was not pleasant to let Mr. Plunkett triumph.

He stood in silence struggling with his thoughts, till his uncle asked: "What have you to say in answer to Mrs. Plunkett?"

Then a rush of anger almost overwhelmed every other feeling, and though he squeezed Winnie's hand as a signal to her not to speak he answered with sullen pride: "I said before I was not there."

His evident perplexity, his glances at Winnie, his anger, were all against him, and Mr. Blair replied coldly: "I shall be very glad, more glad than I can tell you, if you can clear yourself from this charge. But if you cannot, at least make a manly confession; this flat denial is childish."

Murtagh remained silent. Winnie's cheeks flushed, and words trembled on her lips. She could not bear Murtagh to be treated in this manner. But again the warning hand squeezed hers; she looked at Murtagh and was silent. If only she had had nothing to do with exciting Pat then she might have spoken. As it was she felt that she had no more right than Murtagh to say a word, and though she could have cried with perplexity and vexation she was forced to be silent.

Her uncle saw her half-movement, and said sadly, as though not liking to abandon his hope of drawing a confession from Murtagh himself: "Can you tell us anything of this matter, Winnie?"

Winnie bit her lips, and looked straight in front of her, with her eyes open to their very widest; it was her way of keeping back tears, but she only shook her head.

Cousin Jane's patience could bear no more.

"Really, John," she exclaimed, "I don't know how you can go on bearing with those children's sulkiness. Make them tell out what they know. It's plain to everybody in the room that they are guilty, and if they have anything to say for themselves let them say it out."

An expression of annoyance passed quickly over Mr. Blair's countenance, but he replied very gently:

"You must let me manage this matter in my own way, Jane."

"Mr. Plunkett," he continued, as Cousin Jane relapsed into indignant silence, "tell us now, if you please, before Murtagh, what you have already told me of his behavior yesterday evening."

Mr. Plunkett gave a short, business-like account of what had happened in the haggart the evening before. It was perfectly accurate; he did not try to slur over the fact that he had struck Murtagh. He said that he regretted the blows which had been meant more for one of the ragamuffins than for Murtagh: and somehow even that, which every one felt Mr. Plunkett had no right to inflict, told against Murtagh, for it furnished an additional motive for his revenge. The dark red mark was plainly visible across his cheek, and it seemed, indeed, a blow which a high-spirited boy was not likely to have received quietly. Only one thing in the story was omitted. Mr. Plunkett had forgotten Pat O'Toole's threat.

"Can you deny any of this?" asked Mr. Blair, as Mr. Plunkett ceased.

"No," replied Murtagh, "it is all quite true."

"But," said Winnie eagerly, "it shows Murtagh couldn't have set fire to the place, because we were very sorry after, and Murtagh was going to have told Mr. Plunkett so this morning."

"Were you, Murtagh?" said Mr. Blair

"Yes," said Murtagh shortly.

Mr. Blair looked toward Mr. Plunkett to see what he thought of that, and Mr. Plunkett replied drily:

"Murtagh has never done such a thing in his life. I must be excused if I do not believe him."

The angry black look that Nessa had so often seen, spread over Murtagh's countenance. He made no answer, but Nessa said at once: "I know he was going to do that."

Her words seemed to strengthen a pleasant conviction that was growing in Mr. Blair's mind, for though he did not look at her the sound of her voice brought a quiet little smile to his lips which did not altogether die away again.

Mr. Plunkett replied in the same dry tones: "The main point of evidence against Murtagh is contained in the fact that Mrs. Plunkett saw him close to the burning haggart at the time of the fire."

"You are quite sure that it was Murtagh?" asked Mr. Blair, turning to Mrs. Plunkett.

"Oh, I'm quite sure," she replied. "I saw his black hair and his gray jacket as plain as I do now."

"But not his face," suggested Mr. Blair. "If he turned and ran away so quickly you could hardly have had time in that uncertain light to make sure of the face."

"If I was on my dying bed I'd swear it was Murtagh," returned Mrs. Plunkett almost in tears.

"And this handkerchief," said Mr. Plunkett, "how did it come in such a place?"

"Yes, Murtagh," said Mr. Blair. "How do you account for this?"

Again Winnie found the temptation to speak almost too strong for her, but Murtagh's hand was holding hers like a vice. Her own sense of right told her she must not, and she only looked more blankly than ever in front of her as Murtagh answered: "I don't know."

His uncle looked puzzled and displeased. Cousin Jane exclaimed: "I told you so; the truth's plain enough to any one who chooses to see it."

Mr. Plunkett felt quietly triumphant. He was fully persuaded that Murtagh had done this, and he was determined to bring it home to him.

But Nessa had guessed the truth from the beginning, and it was now her turn to speak.

"Uncle Blair," she said, earnestly, "I am quite sure Murtagh has not done this. I think it is another person."

Her uncle looked towards her with surprise. An expression of impatience, instantly repressed, crossed Mr. Plunkett's countenance.

"Why, my child?" said Mr. Blair, "what can you know about it?"

"Do you not remember," she said, turning to Mr. Plunkett, "at the end, before they went away, Pat O'Toole said he would be revenged because you struck him?"

"Pat O'Toole!" exclaimed Mr. Blair. "Why, Plunkett, you forgot to mention this."

"I am sorry," replied Mr. Plunkett, feeling annoyed with himself for not having been strictly business-like. "I mentioned that I thrashed a boy, but I did not know his name, and I paid little attention to the threat he uttered at the gate. The incident seemed to me to have no importance."

"But," said Nessa, a little disappointed to hear by Mr. Plunkett's voice that his conviction was unshaken, "this boy does not look much bigger than Murtagh; he has black hair too, and I think he had a gray jacket yesterday. Mrs. Plunkett might easily have been mistaken. She saw him only for one moment. And, besides," she continued, turning towards her uncle, and suddenly lighting up as she sometimes did, "Murtagh could not have done it. He would not have done it. Only one of those people would have done a thing so cowardly and so cruel."

"I think you are right, my dear," said her uncle gravely. "Plunkett, this alters the affair," he said, turning to Mr. Plunkett. "I can do no more till I see this boy. Will you send for him? I should like to speak to him immediately after breakfast. You may go now," he added, speaking to Murtagh. "I shall want you again by-and-by. You are of my opinion, are you not, Plunkett?"

"No, sir," replied Mr. Plunkett firmly. "I cannot say that my opinion is in any way altered. But it is advisable to leave no point disregarded."

Murtagh was in despair at the new turn affairs were taking. In his simplicity he had never thought of Nessa guessing too who was really guilty, and now he did not know how to prevent Pat from being found out.

"But Pat's four years older than me," he stammered, "and he's not a bit like me; is he, Winnie?"

His defence was weak and hesitating, and he scarcely dared to look up.

Mr. Plunkett was looking at him coldly. "I quite agree with you," he said.

As they left the room Frankie hurried to seize Murtagh's arm, exclaiming: "I say, Myrrh, old fellow, what a shame!" But his mother, contrary to her wont, contradicted him flatly.

"You don't know anything about the matter, Frankie," she said. "I'm sure if you were as naughty as your cousins it would break my heart. But, indeed, it is no wonder," she continued, addressing the society in general, "considering the way that Mr. Blair treats them. A thorough good whipping would do them all the good in the world."

The remark was uttered on the threshold of the study, so Mr. Blair heard it, of course; but he only looked at Nessa with one of his quaint smiles, and asked her to come to him after breakfast.

CHAPTER XX.

THE news of the fire had by this time spread all over the house, and Rosie and Bobbo were waiting in the passage eager to know what was happening in the study. They seized upon Murtagh the instant the door was shut and inquired what was the matter, but while Frankie answered them Murtagh whispered something to Winnie.

"I 'll come too!" she exclaimed in answer, and pushing the others on one side they ran away together.

"It will all come out now," said Murtagh despondingly, as soon as they were out of hearing; "and the only thing to be done is just to let him know what 's coming."

"Yes," said Winnie with a sigh, and then they ran alongside of each other in silence till the O'Tooles' cabin came in sight.

"I say, Win, what do you think they 'll do to him?" asked Murtagh, stopping to take breath, and feeling, now that he was so close, as if he would rather do anything than tell Pat he was discovered.

"I don't know," replied Winnie; "something dreadful I expect, because you see the fire spread to the house and it 's burnt too. And, Myrrh, I wonder which of the children it is that 's hurt. Supposing it was to die!"

"And it is all our fault!" said Murtagh.

They looked at each other for a moment in silence, but the thought was too dreadful; they could not face it. Quickening their footsteps they soon stood within the cottage.

Mrs. O'Toole was crouching over the fire, but she started up on their entrance, and they asked at once for Pat.

"What is it ye want with Pat?" she inquired, by way of answer.

"We want to talk to him about something; there's no time to lose!" replied Murtagh.

"Sure ye can leave your message with me. Is it about them night-lines he was settlin' for yez?" suggested Mrs. O'Toole.

"No, no," returned Murtagh impatiently; "I must see himself. Is he inside?"

"Sit down, yer honor, and have a bit of griddle cake," said Mrs. O'Toole, wiping a stool with her apron; "maybe he'd be in in a minnit. It's the whitest flour I've had this long time."

"No, thanks," replied Murtagh, "we can't wait; we must go and try to find him."

Out they went accordingly to the village, where he was generally to be found lolling on the grass by the roadside, minding the goat and playing marbles. They searched a long time in the village and up and down the road but they could not find him, and one of his usual playmates at last volunteered the information that Pat had not been out this morning. Mrs. O'Toole had been down herself to milk the goat, and she had told them that Pat was ill in bed.

"Ill in bed!" exclaimed Murtagh. "Then perhaps—Oh, Winnie, come along; we'd better go back."

"Mrs. O'Toole!" he exclaimed, as they once more entered the cottage. "What made you tell us Pat was out, when he's ill in bed?"

"Sure, Mr. Murtagh, honey, I never said he was out; heaven forbid! I only said maybe he'd be in in a minnit."

While he was speaking Murtagh crossed over without ceremony to the door of the little inner room. But Mrs. O'Toole started up and threw herself between him and it, exclaiming:

"Ye can't go in there, Mr. Murtagh! The place is not cleaned up at all. It's not fit for a gentleman like ye!"

"I tell you I must speak to Pat!" persisted Murtagh with his hand on the latch.

"But ye mustn't, Mr. Murtagh, dear!" cried Mrs. O'Toole, her voice growing strangely eager and imploring. "I tell ye ye musn't. It 's the infection he 's got; he 's down with the small-pox!"

"As if I cared twopence for the small-pox," replied Murtagh, impetuously bursting open the door as he spoke, and springing towards the press bed where Pat generally slept.

But the room was empty! and the bed had not been slept in that night.

Murtagh turned to Mrs. O'Toole more for a confirmation of his worst fears than for an explanation. But she, poor woman, seeing that no concealment was possible, had thrown her apron over her head and was rocking herself backwards and forwards in an agony of tears.

Tears came to Winnie's eyes too, as she stood and looked at her. There was no need to ask any question; but after a minute Murtagh said, half-reproachfully: "You needn't have told any lies to *me*, Mrs. O'Toole."

"Oh, Mr. Murtagh, asthore, don't betray us!" was her only answer. "It 's my only son; the only one ever I had!"

"Where is he?" asked Murtagh, in a choked voice.

"He 's gone away! He 's gone away!" replied Mrs. O'Toole, drawing a bit of paper from her breast. "Oh, Pat, my darlint, whatever made you do it?"

Neither Murtagh nor Winnie dared to say a word. Murtagh took the bit of paper in silence, and Winnie looking over his shoulder read: "Mother, I 've done it, and I 'm gone away for ever! Good-by; God bless ye!"

"For ever! for ever! an' he was the only one I had," repeated the poor woman. "Oh," she cried, "may the curse of heaven and hell rest upon him that provoked him to it! They say he bate the boy last night. He 's been a blight an' a curse upon the country since the day he first set foot in it; but I pray to God Almighty above us it may come back upon his own head."

"Oh, don't," said Murtagh: "it was all us. And do you know," he added, as the consequences of his temper pushed themselves one after the other upon his mind, "one of Mr. Plunkett's children was hurt in the fire too?"

"Know, ay I know," she replied fiercely. "It's his eldest too; the one they say he do care for a bit; and I've been prayin' ever since it may die, an' let him feel what it is to be robbed o' your child. Oh, my Pat! my Pat!" she sobbed out, suddenly bursting again into tears and forgetting all her fierceness.

"Listen," said Murtagh, in the greatest distress. "Let us think what we are to do. He's going to be sent for in a minute to be examined. That's what we came down to tell him."

"Is it discovered already he is?" she cried, full of a new fear. "Oh, if they catch him and bring him back to prison! "Mr. Murtagh, ye won't betray us; Miss Winnie, asthore? Ye 're only children, but ye won't say a word?"

"You needn't be afraid," cried Winnie and Murtagh together. "They won't get a word out of us."

"But," continued Murtagh, "how will you manage?"

"God bless yez, God bless yez," she answered warmly. And then in a different tone: "Let me alone for bamboozling the polis if they come here after him. All he 'll want will be a couple of hours. If he gets till this evening never a man o' the polis will lay a hand on him."

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when a shaking of the rickety garden-gate told that some one was coming. There were only five or six steps from the gate to the cottage, and the next instant Mr. Plunkett himself stood upon the threshold.

The children glanced in despair round the room, thinking that the confusion which prevailed would surely betray something. But as if by magic everything had returned to its usual condition, the bedroom door was shut, Mrs O'Toole's cap put straight, and she was bending over the fire stirring something in a saucepan. The children alone were confused, for while they started and blushed Mrs. O'Toole said calmly, as though in continuation of a sentence:

"I tell you, Mr. Murtagh, honey, he went out early to the bog with his father to cut peat, an' the father said maybe they 'd be in to dinner and maybe they wouldn't."

"Are you speaking of your son?" inquired Mr Plunkett, looking with suspicion at Murtagh and Winnie.

Mrs. O'Toole turned round in well-feigned astonishment at the new voice. She could not altogether repress the scowl that gathered upon her face, but she dropped a respectful curtsy as she answered:

"I am, yer honor."

She had said truly enough, that they might let her alone for bamboozling whoever came after Pat. She had been off her guard when the children came; but now Pat was out with his father sure enough, and she had such a bad recollection for names, she could not rightly call to mind whether it was out Ballybrae way he was, or up past Armaghbaeg, or maybe it wasn't there at all but up over the hills. But anyway he 'd very likely be in to dinner, so it wouldn't be worth sending for him yet awhile till they saw whether he 'd be coming.

Mr. Plunkett felt so convinced that his wife was not mistaken in thinking she had seen Murtagh at the fire that he never for a moment supposed Pat guilty, but placed ready faith in Mrs. O'Toole's apparent nonchalance. At the same time, however, he considered it his duty to take Pat to Mr. Blair without delay; so he said the boy must be sent for at once.

Mrs. O'Toole was quite equal to the emergency. "There were plenty of idle gossoons in the village," she said, "who would be glad of a run;" and two or three lads were sent in different directions with orders from Mr. Plunkett to bring Pat home directly.

They received private instruction from Mrs. O'Toole to wink both eyes if they saw Pat, and if they met O'Toole to tell him to keep himself out of the way; and it is needless to say whose orders they obeyed. Murtagh added that they might take as long as they liked to look for him; and before the afternoon the whole village knew that some mystery was on foot. It was the general opinion that Murtagh and Pat had between them burnt down the contents of Mr. Plunkett's haggart, and that anyhow no one was to know a word about Pat O'Toole. Sympathy was all on the boys' side. And though in the course of the morning several of the villagers were examined by Mr. Plunkett, nothing could be drawn from them.

Till Pat was found no further examination of the children would take place, but in the mean time Murtagh and Winnie were very miserable. They hung round the house watching the entrances in nervous dread lest Pat might after all be caught and brought before their uncle.

Cousin Jane forbade Frankie to speak to them till they chose to confess their guilt, and Rosie and Bobbo tried in vain to think of comforting things to say.

The instant they heard the story, Pat's guilt was as clear to them as to the other two, but since Murtagh and Winnie said the only thing to be done was to hold their tongues, the idea of attempting to clear Murtagh did not come into any of their minds. Bobbo said it was a beastly shame, but Murtagh and Winnie replied disconsolately that it was really just the same as if they had done it themselves; and as the others always accepted their morals from Murtagh and Winnie, the whole school-room took this view.

At Murtagh's suggestion Winnie went, after a time, to try and get Nessa by herself to warn her against betraying Pat. But first Nessa was in the study with Mr. Blair, and then just as Winnie was going to catch her in the passage, Cousin Jane came to the drawing-room door with a face full of dismay and beckoned. Winnie caught the words, "doctor," "terrible," "send at once."

Nessa's face became very grave; then the door shut upon them both, and the child was left outside full of wondering trouble.

Finding it was useless to wait for Nessa, she returned to the others and told what she had heard. The words filled them all with vague fear. They did not quite know what they dreaded, but they were in a state of nervous depression in which everything suggested painful possibilities.

Their apprehensions were soon increased by seeing one of the men ride fast from the stable down the avenue. The stable was at some distance from the house, and before they could reach him to ask what was the matter he was out of sight.

"He 's gone for the doctor, I suppose," said Winnie, but they did not dare to go in and ask any questions; somehow they felt afraid of everybody to-day.

At last Nessa came out of the house and began to walk across the park. The children hailed her appearance with relief; at least they were not afraid of her; and running up to her they asked what was the matter; was Frankie ill?

"Frankie is ill," replied Nessa; "Cousin Jane says excitement always makes him ill. But we have sent for the doctor for Mr. Plunkett's child; they say she is dying. That pretty golden-haired little girl — the eldest of them." Nessa's voice was trembling; she remembered so well the transparent beauty of the child, and the loving looks of both father and mother. "It seems a piece of wood fell upon her head when they were taking her out of the burning nursery," she continued. "First she fainted, then she seemed quite, quite well, and now the servant who came to find Mr. Plunkett says she is dying."

A sudden awe fell upon the children. "Dying!" They could scarcely believe it. No one had ever died in their experience.

"Oh, Nessa!" exclaimed Rosie, but the others were all silent.

"Will you come with me?" said Nessa. looking at their white shocked faces. "You need not come into the house, but you will know. And perhaps you may be of use if there are messages."

Most gratefully, though silently, the children accepted her invitation. At least they would know what was happening, and if they were really able to be of use that would be something. Anything was better than being shut out forgotten in the park.

At a short distance from the Red House they were overtaken by Mr. Plunkett, who with an anxious face was walking up swiftly from the village.

"David himself has gone for the doctor," said Nessa, "and if he does not find yours he will ride on at once to Ballyboden; he will not come back without one." Her voice conveyed all the sympathy that she felt. It was not a moment to put it into words.

But evidently Mr. Plunkett did not yet know of his child's danger.

"What?" he said hoarsely, trying to seem unmoved.

"You have not heard—that she is rather worse?" asked Nessa, steadying her voice in order to break the news as gently as possible.

But Mr. Plunkett was not a man to have news broken to him. Nessa's voice, when she first addressed him, had told that the doctor had not been lightly sent for, and he preferred to know the worst at once. A sort of gray color spread over his face. Standing quite still before Nessa he seemed to pierce her through with his eyes.

"Is she dying?" he asked. He stood erect as usual. He tried to keep his face in the same unrelaxed mold. For all his pain he could not bear that these strangers should see him suffer. But the cold stern voice was strangely broken; in spite of himself such a dumb agony of suspense was in his eyes that Nessa, not daring to speak untruly, was moved with sudden sympathy to put her hand in his. The touch of her fingers, the sorrow in her face, conveyed the answer she could not have framed in words.

"Not dead?" he forced his lips to say, while almost unconsciously his hand closed tightly upon hers.

"No; oh no," she answered quickly, "and the doctor will soon be here, perhaps——"

But he waited for no more. With a few rapid strides he was in the house, and Nessa not liking just then to enter, remained with the children where he had left her.

No one spoke; the children with white awe-stricken faces stood looking towards the window, as though they expected in that way to find out something of what was passing inside. Nessa tried to think if nothing could be done to help. Must they wait passively till the doctor came?

A sudden sound of one of the little Plunketts crying helped her to collect her thoughts. Telling the children to wait, she went quietly through the blackened doorway, and found, as she had expected, the three Plunkett babies alone. Their nursery had been burnt, and they were drearily trying to play in an empty kitchen. They were so hungry, the eldest said, and nobody came with their dinner.

After a few words with the nurse, who passed up the stairs and gave her some details of Marion's condition, Nessa took the children out, and told Rosie and Winnie to take them home with them for dinner, and to try and amuse them for the rest of the day. So at least the house would be quiet, and the poor parents have less to think of. Then she told the boys they must get some ice. "I am sure when the doctor comes he will order ice for her head," she said, "and it will be good to have it here."

Humbly thankful they were to have something to do. Murtagh was too miserable now for words, for he had had time to remember that this also was his fault. They found out from Donnie where they were to go for the ice, and then they went to the haggart to get the horse and cart. The straw was lying about just as they left it. Their hands had pushed the cart into its shed the evening before, but Murtagh could hardly believe, as they pulled it out, that it was only yesterday they had been so happy. Oh, why couldn't he be good?

The way was long; and it was getting late in the afternoon when the boys returned to the Little House with the ice. They had had no dinner, but they cared little for that, and only asked with anxious faces if there was nothing else they could do. Nessa understood well enough, and she set them to work at once in the garden to pound the ice as nearly as possible into powder.

It was greatly wanted. The doctor had not yet arrived, and during the early part of the afternoon little Marion had got worse and worse. Mrs. Plunkett was able to do nothing, but stood at the bottom of the bed and wept, while Mr. Plunkett sat with a face of unnatural calm, and tried to soothe the poor child's ravings with tender words. But at last Nessa had gone up and had succeeded in quieting her a little by laying wet cloths upon her head. So now with new hope they were waiting for the ice.

Long after it grew dark, though the wind was bitterly cold, the two boys still sat in the garden pounding the ice, and Nessa came backwards and forwards from the house to fetch a bowlful of it as it was wanted, comforting their hearts from time to time with an account of how little Marion grew quieter and quieter as each cloth full of the cold powder was laid upon her head.

They could not go into the house, for the sound of the pounding would have echoed through all the rooms, but they worked on, never thinking of the cold or the darkness. They felt able to do anything now they had a spark of hope.

After a time Winnie joined them with Royal. Mrs. Donegan had put the little Plunketts to bed at the house, she said, and she didn't know where Murtagh was or what he was doing, so she had come out to look for him. She seemed very disconsolate, but the boys were cheered now with their work and the better accounts of Marion; so they told what they were doing, and Bobbo groped about till he found a big stone for her to pound with too Then she knelt down beside them and worked away, while Royal, with some wonderful instinct of their trouble, stretched himself out upon the ground and lay patiently watching the three children.

In the house, too, hope was beginning to revive. Mrs. Plunkett had been persuaded to lie down, and worn out with weeping she had fallen asleep, while Mr. Plunkett, seeing that Nessa's simple remedy had some effect, concentrated himself upon applying it. No one else touched Marion. His hardness had completely vanished, and tenderly as a woman he did for her everything that she needed. Nessa, seeing how he liked to do it, kept in the background, only preparing what was needful, and bringing it to him in order that he might remain always by the child's bedside.

So the evening wore away, till at last the rumble of wheels announced that the doctor was coming. Royal was the first to hear the welcome sound, and a low growl from him announced it to the children.

"Now we shall know," said Murtagh; and with eager expectation they watched the doctor walk up the path. Winnie ran to the door and begged Nessa to let them know quickly what he said, but it seemed to them a long, long time before any one came.

They could see three dark shadows sometimes on the blind of the room where Marion lay, and though they tried to go on with their work the ice often numbed their fingers as they absently held a lump in their hands and gazed up for some sign of Nessa coming. After one of those long looks Murtagh had just begun pounding again, when suddenly the door opened, and the doctor's voice called cheerily from the blaze of light that streamed out over the steps: "Where are you, my young workers? Your ice has saved her life."

Till those words lifted the load off their hearts, the children scarcely knew how heavy it had been.

"She won't die?" said Murtagh, eagerly springing to the bottom of the steps.

"No, no," replied the doctor; "not now if she has the same nursing through the night."

"I thought somehow she couldn't die," said Bobbo, standing up and rubbing his cramped legs. Winnie expressed her feelings by flinging her arms round Royal's neck, and giving him an ecstatic squeeze. Then Nessa appeared behind the doctor, and joined her assurance to his.

She was to stay and spend the night with Marion, but the doctor insisted on driving the children home in his gig. He was a tender-hearted man, who had a lot of merry little brothers and sisters at home, and the idea of children being so troubled as these was to him unnatural. It would have disturbed him to think of them after he got home, so as they drove along he made light of Marion's danger, and talked and laughed with them, till by the time they reached the house they were in quite a bright mood.

After the doctor left them they stopped on the steps to bid Royal good-night, and kneeling down beside him Winnie said:

"We 've been very miserable to-day, Royal; very miserable; but it is wonderful how things always come right after. They always do, Royal; so if ever you 're miserable you can remember that."

Royal looked solemnly at her as though he understood every word, but as she finished he put a paw upon each of her shoulders and by way of answer gravely licked her face.

Bobbo burst out laughing, and the others followed his example.

"Oh, Royal dear, you are a darling!" cried Winnie. And Cousin Jane, passing through the hall to bed, overheard them, and remarked to Emma that she never would have believed children could be so heartless as to be laughing and playing with the dog when that poor little girl might be lying dead through their wickedness.

CHAPTER XXI.

MURTAGH slept late next morning, and he was wakened by Winnie who wanted him to get up and come and inquire about Pat. Anxiety about Marion had made him completely forget Pat, but now that trouble returned upon him in full force. He got up and went with Winnie to see Mrs. O'Toole. But nothing had been heard of Pat, and between her longing to see the boy and dread lest the police should find him Mrs. O'Toole was in terrible grief. The children could give her no comfort, and they wandered sadly back to the house.

Frankie was in bed, but Cousin Jane came and told them they might go in and see him. He had set his heart upon seeing them, and she could not refuse when he was ill. She begged they would not put any of their hardened notions into his head, but they were too glad of being able to see Frankie to care for anything Cousin Jane said.

He welcomed them delightedly, eager to know what they had done yesterday. Anything that concerned them was always of the deepest interest to him. He was too delicate ever to have any adventures of his own. His mother and Emma were his only companions, and all the romance of his life was centred in Murtagh and Winnie.

There was something very touching in the almost worshipful admiration with which he regarded them. He thought them nearly perfect, and if he had ever had a dream for himself it would have been to be like Murtagh, and to do the things Murtagh did. Only he never dreamt anything for himself; perhaps, poor little fellow, it did not seem to him worth while. And if he had no visions for his own future he made up for it by the fertility of imagination with which he planned out Murtagh's. Everything that most boys determine to do, when they are grown up, he used to lay plans for Murtagh to do. He would often lie for hours upon the sofa, picturing to himself Murtagh walking up before assembled rows of school-boys to receive impossible numbers of first prizes; Murtagh winning cricket-matches, or Murtagh leading troops to battle. There was no wonderful feat in history that Murtagh had not outdone many a time in Frankie's ambitious imagination.

Sometimes in his pictures he saw Winnie walking or riding by Murtagh's side; but himself never. He forgot his life in theirs. Visits to Castle Blair constituted the happiest part of his existence. So it was no wonder that he was full of eager sympathy for his two cousins in their present trouble.

Troubled as Murtagh and Winnie were at their share in this misfortune, it was very soothing to their sore consciences to talk with Frankie. His ideas of right and wrong used to become very confused where Winnie and Murtagh were concerned. All he thought about was how best to comfort them, and in the end he invariably succeeded in proving, to his own satisfaction at least, that they had been perfectly right.

They used to talk more of what they really thought with Frankie than children generally do together; more indeed than they did even to one another; and they confided to him now, in their own odd scrappy fashion, the sore regrets by which they were assailed.

With all his goodwill, even Frankie was puzzled to reconcile their resolutions on the mountain with the scene in the haggart that so closely followed them. But then he said that Mr. Plunkett was so nasty nobody could help being rude to him (Frankie had never been rude to any one in his life); and, of course, they couldn't possibly know that one of the followers would go and set fire to his haystacks. The whole misfortune, he finally declared, was as much owing to Mr. Plunkett as to them. He would go out and be disagreeable when Nessa told him they were excited. It was all his own fault; and then he could not be contented without making false accusations, and trying to get Murtagh into trouble.

But Murtagh was not easily to be comforted, and perhaps Frankie had himself some misgivings as to the strength of his arguments, for he exerted himself to divert Murtagh's thoughts into another channel.

"Never mind, Myrrh, dear," he said, "Marion will soon be well now, and I daresay they'll never find out which of your followers did it. Next week we shall all three be down at the seaside, far away, where you'll never see Mr. Plunkett nor be worried with his rules. There will be nobody to order you about there. We will all do just whatever we please, and this whole affair will be forgotten by the time you come back."

Then he launched out into enthusiastic descriptions of the place to which they were going; and in the interest of planning how they would spend the days when they got there the children were by degrees drawn into forgetting Pat, Marion, Mr. Plunkett, and everything connected with the fire. After a time they called in Royal, and Frankie made him display his various accomplishments. Bobbo and Rosie joined them later in the day, and so they forgot to be unhappy for nearly the whole afternoon.

Nessa, in the mean time, had spent her day at the Red House, but Marion was now quite out of danger and towards four o'clock she prepared to return home.

Mr. Plunkett would not let her walk alone, and as they went together across the park he took the opportunity of thanking her warmly for all that she had done. The doctor had told him that without her timely help Marion might have died, and he was not a man to be ungrateful for any real obligation.

It was one of those moments of unreserve that come sometimes after a heavy strain.

"You may think me hard and cold," he said, "but Marion is to me more ——" Then strong as he was his voice faltered. He seemed for one moment to realize all that he had so nearly lost, and instead of words there came only an inarticulate choking sound. He recovered himself immediately, but he did not try to finish his sentence. Then he allowed himself to be drawn on by Nessa's genuine admiration of his child to talk of her, and to describe some of her pretty ways: till Nessa, talking with him freely and pleasantly as she would have talked with any one else, found herself wondering how she could ever have thought him so very disagreeable.

But as they emerged from under the trees and came in sight of the house his voice suddenly changed, and he exclaimed:

"Can you wonder then that I am determined to punish to the uttermost the heartless spite that in revenge for a just rebuke could imperil such innocent lives? You, Miss Blair, a stranger, can have little conception of all that we have been forced to suffer from Murtagh and his brother and sisters, but now it passes a matter of inconvenience. Impertinence and annoyance I could and would have endured, but to have my child hurt, to have her life, her reason endangered, to gratify the caprice of an insolent boy ——" Mr. Plunkett's words were coming out fiercely, and he stopped suddenly as though not trusting himself to finish his sentence.

He was transformed; he was no longer the correct Mr. Plunkett that Nessa knew. His face was pale, his eyes full of a strange light; he was a man, — a man struggling with a violent emotion.

"But you cannot, you do not think still that Murtagh set fire to your house?" she exclaimed, standing still and looking up anxiously into his face. "It was not Murtagh; I know it was not."

"You think you know, Miss Blair, but you are mistaken. I have known the boy longer than you, and I tell you he is guilty."

"You did not see him on Wednesday evening after that scene with you," said Nessa, "and you did not see him yesterday, or you could not think that He was so sorry for you yesterday, and so anxious to help. If you had seen his white sad face you could not think it was a pretence. Examine that other boy, and you will see that Murtagh is not guilty."

Mr. Plunkett had recovered now his usual demeanor. He replied quietly: "I cannot agree with you, Miss Blair; I am perfectly willing that young O'Toole should be examined, but you have only to count up the evidences of Murtagh's guilt to be yourself convinced of the uselessness of the proceeding; his presence at the fire; his confusion on finding himself discovered; his inability to answer any of the charges made against him."

As they walked on again towards the house, he continued in a calm dispassionate voice: "Directly he left his uncle's presence he rushed off to O'Toole's cottage. What could he have wanted there if not to beg Pat to keep his secret safe? His very anxiety about my poor child is only another reason for believing him guilty. He dislikes me; he has no affection for her; and I cannot believe he would have displayed such excessive anxiety had he not been smitten with remorse and terror at the consequences of his act. If he had come forward and confessed openly, instead of allowing the blame to be half-shifted on to another, I might have entertained some softer feeling towards him, but as it is I feel nothing but a just anger and contempt. He has shown himself not only revengeful but cowardly and dishonorable."

Mr. Plunkett had only seen one side, and that the worst, of Murtagh's character. Upon that he based his judgment, and it was perfectly impossible to him to enter into the very different view which Nessa took of the same facts. In vain she pleaded Murtagh's cause. Mr. Plunkett had covered himself again with his usual shell, and words had no effect

At last almost indignant she appealed to justice. "You ought to believe he is speaking the truth till you are quite sure he is not," she said. "You have not yet made any search among the people in the country."

But that was as useless as the rest. "It is impossible for me to believe he is speaking the truth," he answered shortly. "I am willing that every inquiry should be made, but I am perfectly convinced of his guilt, and so long as he remains hardened in denial he must expect nothing but the utmost severity from me."

Those were his parting words. They had reached the gravel sweep that divided the park from the house, and he bowed and left her.

As she entered the hall she met Murtagh, who had been watching her from Frankie's window, and who now came running down to know how little Marion was.

"Better," said Nessa, "much better;" but she was thinking of her conversation with Mr. Plunkett, and her voice was not in accordance with her news.

"You 're dreadfully tired, aren't you?" said Murtagh.

"Yes," said Winnie, who had followed him down, "of course she must be after being up all night. Come along, Myrrh, we 'll get her some tea. And you go and lie down in your room," she added, holding one of Nessa's hands for a moment in both of hers, and laying her cheek against it.

"Thank you," said Nessa, stooping to kiss the little brown forehead. "Yes, I should like some tea." And as the two children ran away to the kitchen she passed up the stairs.

A few minutes later they appeared in her room with their little tray. They had arranged it after their own fashion, with a white napkin and a tiny blue vase full of flowers. Winnie's cheeks were rosy with the making of toast, and while Nessa drank her tea and admired the flowers the two children watched her radiantly.

"We made it all ourselves," exclaimed Winnie when the first cup was nearly finished. "Donnie wasn't there, but we knew the water was boiling, because the top of the kettle was bobbing up and down." Nessa asked for a second cup, and the delighted children were as happy as little kings because she found their tea so good.

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. PLUNKETT meant what he had said to Nessa. Convinced of Murtagh's guilt he was resolved to bring him to just punishment, and that without delay. Next day, therefore, he begged Mr. Blair to continue his investigation. Poor Mr. Blair, who had completely accepted Nessa's view, took no longer the slightest interest in the affair. Provided it was not Murtagh he did not care in the very least who was guilty. All he desired was to be left in peace.

However, since Mr. Plunkett was not satisfied, and since Mr. Plunkett had a strong will to which Mr. Blair was accustomed to yield, there was nothing for it but to send for Pat O'Toole and sift the matter to the bottom. Marion's illness had diverted all attention from Pat, and his absence was as yet undiscovered. Mr. Plunkett sent a message to him to appear; Mrs. O'Toole put off the inevitable announcement of his flight to the last moment; and it was not till every one else was assembled in the study that it became known that he was gone.

The news was received by Mr. Blair and Nessa as a simple proof of Murtagh's innocence. In their eyes nothing more was needed, and they expected that Mr. Plunkett would now be convinced of his mistake. But Mr. Plunkett held his own opinion much too firmly to be easily shaken in it.

He believed that his wife had seen Murtagh at the fire, and he said, naturally, that Pat's flight did not actually prove him guilty, and that even had it done so, Murtagh's innocence was not thereby established. The two boys were known to be friends, and what was more likely than that Murtagh should have chosen Pat as an accomplice? It was evident that they had some secret together, since Murtagh's first action after the news of the fire had been made known was to run away to the O'Tooles' cottage.

"He will hardly venture to deny this," added Mr. Plunkett, "for I saw him there myself with Winnie. And young O'Toole had not gone then, for I overheard the mother telling Murtagh that her son was on the bog with his father."

When the news of Pat's flight had arrived Murtagh had felt a grim satisfaction at the prospect of Mr. Plunkett's discomfiture, thinking like Nessa that his own innocence was now fully established. It seemed to him so plain that he could not imagine how different the case might seem to Mr. Plunkett; and now as he stood listening to the array of evidence brought forward to prove his guilt, a turmoil of bitter indignation raged within him.

All that Frankie had said the day before came back to his mind, and every bit of sorrow for his own fault was swallowed up in angry rebellion against what seemed to him willful injustice. He could not believe that Mr. Plunkett did not in his heart know that he was innocent. Stung to the quick, he took a proud, unreasoning determination to say not one word in his own defence, and after the first stormy flash that overspread his countenance, he stood with eyes cast down and a white obdurate face that defied all questioning.

It was not so with Winnie. Through her indignation and disgust a dim suspicion, which she had herself rejected before, flashed suddenly into belief. Mr. Plunkett was doing it on purpose. He did not really believe Murtagh guilty, but he had a spite against him for what had happened in the haggart, and this was his mean way of revenging himself.

Her cheeks flamed, and her eyes flashed with indignation; but it was not her way to speak in passionate gusts as Murtagh did, so she clasped her hands on the back of her head, and waited till Mr. Plunkett wound up a somewhat elaborate argument by asking every one in the room to decide whether he had not good grounds for believing Murtagh to be guilty.

Then before any one could answer, she said in a cool aggravating voice:

"Yes, I daresay, if we didn't all know you're doing this just because you have a spite against Murtagh."

"Well!" exclaimed Cousin Jane, "these children are allowed to talk in the funniest way I ever heard."

"I don't see why things shouldn't be fair," returned Winnie. "Mr. Plunkett keeps on telling us we are telling lies, and why mayn't we tell him the same? If you won't believe what Murtagh says I don't see why you should believe what Mr. Plunkett says. Mr. Plunkett says Murtagh did this because of what happened in the haggart, but it's a *great deal* more likely Mr Plunkett's trying to get Murtagh into a scrape to revenge himself for what happened. Just as if Murtagh would ever bother his head to be revenged on anybody like him!"

The supreme scorn of the last words was unmistakable, and Mr. Blair, in some astonishment, said with quiet dignity: "Winnie, that seems a strange way to speak to Mr. Plunkett. Every one who knows him knows that nothing could be more impossible to him."

"The idea of children talking like that to a grown-up person!" remarked Cousin Jane.

"That's always the way," cried Winnie, her pent-up wrath bursting forth at last. "Just because we are children we're to hold our tongues and let people say what they like to us, and tell all sorts of lies about our doing things we didn't do; and then if we say a word about them doing a thousand times worse things we're told to be quiet. But I don't care what five hundred million grown-up people say, Murtagh didn't do this, and Mr. Plunkett knows he didn't just as well as I do."

Mr. Blair looked at her in still greater surprise. He thought little girls were quiet and obedient. He had not the slightest idea what to do or say in reply; but at last, with a sort of instinct that it would be safest to have her near Nessa, he said:

"You may go and sit down now, my dear; Nessa will make room for you I daresay on the sofa beside her."

He glanced over at Nessa as he spoke with such a comical expression of despair that they both nearly laughed, to Cousin Jane's intense indignation.

Mr. Blair, however, became grave again at once, and turned to Mr. Plunkett to listen to all the reasons he was urging in favor of some serious punishment being inflicted upon Murtagh. Mr. Plunkett was very much in earnest upon this matter. He had thought of it a great deal, and he was determined to make an example of Murtagh which none of the other children should forget. His manner was perhaps more than usually cold and business-like, but his ordinary brevity was laid aside, and he spoke at some length. Too courteous to interrupt, Mr. Blair listened patiently till he had ceased speaking. But then instead of at once answering Mr. Plunkett, he turned to Murtagh and said:

"Murtagh, will you give me your word of honor that you were not at this fire, and that you did not in any way wilfully cause it?"

Murtagh had stood immovable while Mr. Plunkett was speaking; but his anger was at all times easy to melt, and there was a ring of trust and friendliness in his uncle's tone which made him look up straight into Mr. Blair's face with bright fearless eyes and answer at once:

"Yes; I give you my word of honor."

"I believe you, my boy!" replied Mr. Blair.

The clouds vanished from Murtagh's face, and with a clear sunny smile he looked across to Nessa for her congratulations.

Winnie and Bobbo started up and clapped their hands, while Bobbo with a beaming countenance said: "I knew it would all come right in the end."

"Plunkett," said Mr. Blair, "I feel how much truth there is in all you say, and if I could for a moment believe Murtagh guilty I would leave it to you to decide his punishment. But though you have certainly evidence enough to justify an opinion, you do not prove his guilt, and I cannot help thinking that the presumptive evidence on the other side is strong enough to make it only just to Murtagh that we should believe him when he assures us on his word of honor that he is innocent." With his mind's eye Mr. Blair saw his study already empty and himself at leisure to return to his books, and his voice was cheerful in proportion. Mr. Plunkett was too much annoyed to be able altogether to retain his calm demeanor.

"Well," he replied, "I have nothing more to say. If you are content upon such an investigation to declare Murtagh innocent the household will, of course, consider him so; but for my part I state openly here that I believe him to be guilty, and that I shall continue so to do till some other person confesses to having committed the crime without his help or instigation."

"Believe away!" retorted Winnie. "Nobody cares in the least what you think!"

"Winnie," said her uncle, "Mr. Plunkett is an old and respected friend of mine."

Mr. Blair so seldom spoke to one of the children that even Winnie's audacious tongue was silenced by the reproof.

"I am very sorry, Plunkett," continued Mr. Blair, "that we cannot persuade you, but still I can't help hoping that when you think the matter over you will come round to our opinion."

"Nothing ever will persuade me," returned Mr. Plunkett, "and Murtagh's guilty conscience can best tell him the reason why."

With those words he took up his hat and left the room

The children were very little disturbed by his opinion. Murtagh's innocence was established, and that was all they cared about. They flocked round Murtagh, and carried him off with many expressions of pleasure

But Cousin Jane was no better satisfied than Mr. Plunkett. She was at all times ready to find fault with these children.

She had established a sort of rivalry in her mind between them and Frankie. Frankie's delicacy was a hard trial to her. She watched over him with a faithful solicitude equalled by few mothers, but she could not hide from herself that he grew no stronger, rather weaker. He was not like other boys; he could not run and jump; he could not even laugh much without being very tired; and Cousin Jane felt in some way aggrieved at every sign of Murtagh's overflowing health and spirits. Frankie was the natural heir to all his uncle's estates; the dream of his mother's life since he had been born was to see him master of Castle Blair; and the thought that perhaps he might die and Murtagh inherit in his stead haunted her continually, till at times she almost hated Murtagh.

Then she disapproved very much of Mr. Blair. He was to her quite incomprehensible. Never opening a book herself, she could not understand the magnetic attraction of book-shelves for Mr. Blair. According to her views of human responsibility it was perfectly sinful of him to shut himself up in the library with musty old parchments and rubbishing stones, and leave his beautiful place to take care of itself. If he pretended to despise such things for his own sake he ought to think of his heirs; it was not just to them.

So Cousin Jane reasoned, and when she disliked any one she disliked everything they did. She had disapproved in the beginning of Launcelct's children coming to live with their uncle at all, and now they were here she disapproved as highly of the way they were treated. Mr. Plunkett was the only person on the estate who had any idea how things should be managed, or who in any way looked after Frankie's interests, and to him Cousin Jane used to pour out all her grievances.

It was not surprising, therefore, that in this instance she was ready to accept Mr. Plunkett's opinion of Murtagh's guilt. She had said from the first that she was sure the boy was guilty, and when once an idea got firmly fixed in her head no power of argument or demonstration could move it. Nessa soon discovered this, and after politely trying for some time to persuade her to see that Murtagh was practically proved to be innocent, she left her to her own opinion and escaped gladly to the children.

Nessa and Royal and the children spent a happy afternoon together. Frankie was better again that day, and was able to be out with them; all their troubles were over and gone — gone so completely that they even seemed not to remember them as they raced and romped upon the grass with Royal. He was a splendid dog, — big and broad-chested, but agile as Winnie herself. And he enjoyed the fun of playing. When he rolled the children over on the grass, and their peals of happy laughter shook the air, you could almost fancy he was laughing too. He sprang backwards and forwards from one child to another, his great black tail whisking about in the air; but though he rolled them over without ceremony he was thoroughly gentle; he would not have hurt them for all the world. Even little Ellie, after a first terrified rush into Nessa's arms, soon discovered that "she wasn't afraid."

She demonstrated the fact by clutching the big black head and trying to poke her little fingers into his eyes every time he gave her the opportunity. But he perhaps understood that she was a baby, for he submitted with perfect good humor, only springing away from her when he had had enough, with a suddenness that sent her sitting down plump upon the moss each time. The first time it happened she looked around with comic surprise, not quite sure whether to laugh or to cry. Then she picked herself up and ran after him, screaming out in delight when the operation was repeated · "Oh, it is such fun! Oh, Ellie do tink it is such fun!"

Then when they grew tired of romping they came and sat on Nessa's rug under the chestnut-tree, and Royal, curled up near Winnie, laid his great muzzle on his forepaws and went to sleep. The white ducks came waddling one by one from the terrace, and Winnie insisted upon introducing them each by name to Nessa as she fed them with scraps of hard bread from her pocket.

Nessa was not skilled in the varieties of form and complexion that distinguish white ducks, and though the children all laughed incredulously at her blindness she was forced to declare that she could see no difference between King, and Senior, and Ruffle, and Nigger. Her education was evidently defective, and they set to work to complete it without delay.

"Do you mean to say now, for instance," asked Winnie, with the compassionate air of one who puts an easy question to a beginner, "that you could mistake that poor sniffling little Snatch for Senior?"

But Nessa was hopelessly ignorant.

"Which is Snatch?" she asked, stretching out her hand to the one who stood nearest to her. "Is it this one?"

"Why, that 's King," said Murtagh, the very head of them all. And all the children laughed; it seemed to them really funny that any one should know so little about white ducks.

Nessa laughed too, and Winnie said: "That 's Snatch with the pale pink bill,—the one that looks as if he was always blowing his nose. We call him Snatch because he never snatches anything."

An excellent reason, no doubt, but Nessa laughed again.

"And then he 's always in every one's way," added Winnie.

"Or at least he 's always being pushed out of every one 's way," said Murtagh. "I suppose it 's the same thing." And Murtagh took a bit of bread from Winnie and threw it across her to poor Snatch. But Royal, the rogue, whom every one thought asleep, suddenly lifted his head and — Snap! Gulp! he had caught the bread, swallowed it, and settled to sleep again, while Snatch looked stupidly round to see where it had gone. How the children laughed, and Royal all the time peeped slily through his eyelashes to watch for another bit coming his way.

So they chattered and laughed all the afternoon, and fed Royal, and the ducks, and the pigeons too, who came cooing and pluming themselves, and walked about in such a dignified fuss, picking all manner of scraps out of the grass. And when, for Frankie's sake, they had to go in, though Nessa left them to rejoin Cousin Jane, they gathered round the school-room fire and chattered and laughed all the same, and laid plans for what they would do when they got away to Torquay with Frankie.

He was so happy in the prospect, poor little fellow! He had not played to-day; he had lain on the rug beside Nessa; but he quite forgot that. He felt as though he had been playing too, and with faintly flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes he sat curled up on the sofa listening in delight.

"Why, of course, you'll be able to swim like two fishes before you come back," he was acquiescing in answer to a remark of Murtagh's, when the door opened and Emma came in. The room was dark now, and the children thought it was Nessa.

"Do you hear, Nessa?" cried Winnie. "We intend to learn to swim at Torquay, and to swim all about the sea into the caves and places where nobody has ever been before."

"It's time for you to come and dress for dinner, Frankie," replied Emma's voice; "and," she added with some primness as Frankie rose reluctantly from the sofa, "you had better not make too many plans for Torquay."

She turned and left the room as she spoke, but Frankie sprang after her, exclaiming: "Emma, what do you mean about Torquay?" and her answer was quite audible as she walked down the passage.

"I mean that of course mamma will not allow Murtagh to be your only playmate for so many months if he persists in telling such stories. There is no knowing what he might teach you."

Murtagh's cheek flushed as he heard the words, and from the other children arose a chorus of:

"What a shame!"

"It can't be true!"

"There 's something else we have to thank Mr. Plunkett for!"

"It 's wicked and unjust," cried Winnie. "He knows as well as I do that you didn't do it. I don't know how he can dare to pretend he doesn't. It 's enough to drive one mad; but there 's one thing, Myrrh, if you don't go, I won't; Cousin Jane needn't think I will."

"It 's not true; it 's only Emma's rubbish," decided Bobbo.

"Let us go and ask Nessa," said Murtagh, with a curious kind of quietness in his voice, and while the others dashed off impatiently to Nessa's room he, thrusting his hands into his pockets, walked slowly after them.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

IT was only too true. It was difficult to say with whom the idea had first originated, but after much talking with Emma and Mr. Plunkett, Cousin Jane had announced that she could not take Murtagh with her unless he were ready to confess his guilt. Mr. Blair was annoyed, but there was no help for it. It was true that

Murtagh had not been altogether proved innocent. He could not be till Pat was found, and till he was everybody had of course a right to their own opinion.

The children were bitterly indignant, but Murtagh still said nothing. The injustice seemed to him at first too impossible to be true; and when he realized that it was true, the feelings it roused against Mr. Plunkett, were such he would have found it difficult to express. A sort of astonished contempt filled his mind. He had not thought before that Mr. Plunkett could be so bad as that, and if at times the thought of his disappointment roused in him hot indignation, this new feeling of sheer disgust made him shrink from even thinking much of Mr. Plunkett.

Frankie's disappointment was beyond expression. For perhaps the first time in his life he behaved like the spoilt child he was. He would not go to the sea at all, he said, or if he did he wouldn't take a bit of trouble to get well. He had set his heart on having his cousin with him, and his mother vainly proposed instead companion after companion. He didn't care for any of them, he said, and all the pleasure of his winter was gone.

Cousin Jane was one of those people who rarely understand the consequences of what they do, and she was greatly disturbed by Frankie's trouble. She had intended to punish Murtagh, not Frankie, and it had seemed to her quite simple to take Bobbo in Murtagh's place. But Bobbo and Winnie declared at once that they would not go anywhere with people who said Murtagh told stories, and when Cousin Jane appealed to Mr. Blair, he replied that he thought they had a right to decide for themselves.

In despair at her son's trouble Cousin Jane would have been glad to change her mind and say that Murtagh might come, but Mr. Plunkett and Emma both urged her to be firm. Mr. Plunkett alone would not perhaps have had sufficient influence, but she was accustomed to be ruled by Emma, and Emma was very determined.

Poor Cousin Jane!—it was a hard fate which had taken away her husband. Nature had intended her to have always some one to lean upon; and who can say how much happier her life would have been had she had a tenderer and more trustworthy counsellor than her sharp and accomplished daughter!

Frankie locked himself into his room and would not see anybody. His poor bewildered mother made herself wretched with thinking how ill he would be after such excitement, and finally retired almost in tears to her own room, declaring that she had never met such children, and that she wished she had never come to Castle Blair to be mixed up in all this trouble. Every one felt dreary and uncomfortable, and the children wandered disconsolately about the house, muttering their opinions of Mr. Plunkett, and wishing aloud that it wasn't Sunday, till Nessa suggested that they should go and pay their weekly visit to Mrs. Daly.

Anything to do was better than nothing, so they readily agreed; and when Nessa had them all to herself out of doors she soon succeeded in gently drawing their thoughts away from the subject which engrossed them

She and Mrs. Donegan had been concocting certain plans for the benefit of Mrs. Daly and one or two other people in the village, and Nessa communicated them to the children. Falling readily into their notion of being bound up into a tribe, she suggested how nice it would be if the tribe could be of real use in the village, and the children, delighted to see a grown-up person entering seriously into a project which they had tried hard to persuade themselves was serious, were hearty in their acceptance of her proposals.

Wild, fierce little things as they seemed, they were something like lambs in lion's clothing. They were up in arms directly, and stormed like staunch little Home Rulers, as they were, at anything they considered unjust, but the slightest appeal to their sympathy was enough to make them forget all about themselves.

The walk was quite pleasant, and it was delightful to find Mrs. Daly sitting up in the sunshine, looking already much better for the wholesome dinner with which Nessa and Donnie provided her every day. After that they paid a very different visit; they went to see Mrs. O'Toole. The poor woman was in bitter grief, and she could not be comforted. An inadvertent mention of Mr. Plunkett's name suddenly roused a storm of rage that made Nessa turn pale and tremble, but the passionate abandonment of grief that followed would have moved to tears a harder heart than hers. Her sweet shy words of comfort were of little use. And when the children spoke hopefully of Pat being found and coming back, the poor mother cried out with a despairing wail: "An' that 'll be the worst of all; oh, my heart 's broken! my heart 's broken!"

They had forgotten for the moment that if he came back it would be to come to prison. So they had to leave her in her desolation, and very sadly, very wearily the children went back to the house. How much of it all was their fault?

But Nessa had promised Mrs. Plunkett to go to the Red House that afternoon to see little Marion, so she left them to pay her visit.

She was not the only visitor at the Red House. Cousin Jane was there, and was there for no less a purpose than to see with Mr. Plunkett whether after all she could not take Murtagh with her.

Her mind was so divided between two opinions that she could not remain firm in either. She was in a most uncomfortable strait. Accustomed for years to use Emma as her brain she was in the habit of taking for granted that Emma's opinion was right, and with a simplicity and abnegation of self that would have been touching had they not been so fraught with mischief, she did always what Emma told her.

But though she was devoted to both her children, though she admired and respected Emma's cleverness, Frankie was the darling of her heart. She was almost ashamed sometimes of loving him so much. It seemed a little bit like treason to Emma. Even in the most secret recesses of her heart she would not for the world have instituted a comparison between them, but in a furtive sort of way, hiding the knowledge from herself, she yet loved Frankie with a love greater than she had given to any one.

She was a little bit afraid of Emma, for Emma used to laugh at her and sometimes even sneer. It never made her the least angry; of course, it was only natural, she thought, when Emma was so clever; but she was happier with Frankie; he was almost always gentle and caressing. Emma stirred her pride and her affection, but there were depths beneath that Frankie, and Frankie only, had ever moved. If Emma was her brain, Frankie was her heart.

She and Frankie had always been content together to do Emma's bidding, and when they did not quite like her plans they had confided their grievance to each other, and almost enjoyed their little mutual grumble; but now, when Frankie absolutely rebelled and Emma still insisted, their mother found herself in a state bordering upon distraction.

Her love for Frankie had never before led her to contradict Emma, and she really dared not. She would rather contradict Frankie himself, for she was not afraid of him. He would love her all the same, and after a time would understand and forgive her. But for all that she could not bear to think of Frankie's winter being spoilt, and with a great effort she had resolved that if Mr. Plunkett would support her she would for once oppose Emma and let Frankie have Murtagh.

This resolve had cost her four or five hours' fighting with herself in the solitude of her own room. Nothing but the remembrance of Frankie's locked door, and the dread that he might get ill and yet not let her in to nurse him, would finally have prevailed; but at last, as picture after picture passed before her mind of the terrible things he might do if he were ill and she not sitting by his bedside, she could bear it no longer, and with sudden determination had started up and gone to consult Mr. Plunkett. If only some one whom she trusted would strongly uphold her she thought she might find it easier to combat Emma's opinion.

She certainly needed somebody else's courage, for she had very little of her own. Even now, animated by all the strength of a sudden resolution, her heart beat like a frightened child's at the idea of meeting Emma, and being asked where she was going.

She reached the Red House without adventure, and finding herself thus far so brave, her hopes were raised quite high. But the little effervescing spirit of courage died quickly away under the influence of Mr. Plunkett's cold tones and grave looks.

In answer to her half-nervous, half-vehement suggestions he urged, with a calm propriety of just determination, the necessity for Murtagh's sake of some punishment being inflicted. Cousin Jane wished with all her heart that she had never said she believed Murtagh guilty, but she had said it over and over again; and though she would have liked to put that part of the question on one side and forget all about it, Mr. Plunkett would not allow her to do anything of the kind.

The arguments he brought forward did not really affect her in the least. Murtagh might be guilty; his character might be ruined by slipshod indulgence; but, in the first place, she could hardly grasp an idea so abstract as the ruin of a person's character by a course of treatment which did not actually drive them to drink and steal; and in the second place, if she had done so she would have thought it mattered very little compared with Frankie's pleasure; she had nothing to do with training Murtagh.

Still, though the arguments did not in the slightest degree change her wish to take Murtagh with her, they had their effect in this way. She felt that they ought to have changed it; that every one would expect them to change it. They were unanswerable, and when Emma used them she would have nothing to urge against them.

All the reason was against her. Her little bit of courage vanished. She could not possibly face Emma unless some one would help her, and she dolefully resigned herself and Frankie to the will of the stronger powers.

The matter was not quite settled when Nessa entered. Quickly gathering the subject of the conversation, she ranged herself at once on Cousin Jane's side. But that, by some strange contradiction, had more effect than all Mr. Plunkett's arguments. Cousin Jane had been a little offended by seeing Nessa installed as mistress at Castle Blair. She had set her down in her mind as an unnatural sort of a girl, just one of John's sort, and directly Nessa advocated Murtagh's departure Cousin Jane began to understand the truth of all Mr. Plunkett urged against it.

She was scarcely conscious of what worked the change in her mind. It was just an effect which people she did not like always had upon her; and while Nessa was pleading Murtagh's cause with Mr. Plunkett, she found herself growing almost reconciled to leaving him behind.

At length she stood up to go, and made a last effort to compromise the matter by saying to Mr. Plunkett:

"Well, I shall tell them it is your doing. I 'm sure I would never have the heart to do it by myself."

Mr. Plunkett was rather pleased that the children should know the punishment came through him, and he assented willingly. It was a great relief to Cousin Jane to find any one at all upon whom she could lay her responsibility, and on her return she took refuge in saying that she could not help it. Mr. Plunkett was determined they should not go. She had been down to him to ask him again, and she could not do any more.

Of all the children Frankie seemed to feel most keenly the slight put upon Murtagh, though after the first indignant outburst he avoided with a kind of shrinking pain any allusion to his departure. Unable to remain outside the heart of any one he loved, he understood and forgave his mother, and by his redoubled tenderness to Murtagh, and the wistful yearning looks with which he followed him about, he seemed to ask Murtagh to forgive her too. "It is not mother, you know," he said once; "it is Mr. Plunkett," and then he hurriedly changed the subject.

Greatly distressed by Frankie's trouble, Murtagh tried to console him, showing himself perfectly cordial with Cousin Jane, and pretending that he did not care so very much for the disappointment. Winnie, too, did her very best, but Frankie was not to be comforted. He seemed to have some secret reason for his depression, and though he followed their footsteps like shadow he paid no heed to their attempts at consolation.

The natural result of his trouble was that he became ill, and his mother in despair was twenty times on the point of changing her mind. But Emma told her that that was nonsense; as for Frankie's health, the best thing she could do was to get him away to the sea at once, and a very good thing it was that there he would be free from the excitement of Murtagh's presence; he had been ill ever since he came to Castle Blair.

That was very true; and then Frankie had already forgiven her, which Emma, she knew, would not do. So Cousin Jane, notwithstanding many tears and protestations of affection to Frankie, held to her resolution, and the days went by to their departure.

But Frankie grew more and more ill, and the sight of his grief rendered his little cousins more determinedly and bitterly indignant against Mr. Plunkett. There was no reason why they should not express as openly as they pleased their opinions of his conduct, and they railed against him in turn, as with each day their angry resentment of the injustice grew stronger.

Nessa was so troubled by their state of mind that she asked Mr. Blair to interfere so far at least as to establish a clear understanding that Cousin Jane might take the children if she chose. But he was tired of children and their concerns, and he only laughed at her a little, and told her that when people are in Ireland they must do as the Irish—leave things to take care of themselves

It would all come right as soon as Cousin Jane was gone.

Royal was the only refuge. He was always good-humored, always ready to entice the children to play. He seemed to understand quite well that they were in trouble, and to want to comfort them. When they were talking angrily he would stand looking up into their faces with a sort of half-puzzled, half-coaxing expression, that seemed to say, "I can't understand a single word. What is the good of it all? come and play with me," and his invitation was almost always successful. Winnie seldom could resist him long.

The moment he saw signs of relaxing in her face he would wag his tail and bound away, looking back to see if she were coming. Then if she did not come at once he would stop suddenly and stand with his forepaws spread wide apart, his head down and his tail up, saying as plainly as action could say it, "You can't catch me, now just try if you can."

That invitation was always irresistible; the children would rush after him in a body, and generally dog and children were in another moment rolling over together in a heap. Then Royal would shake himself free, and bound off again to have the same rolling repeated further on, till the children forgot their troubles in a sheer romp.

The day before Cousin Jane's departure especially his success was unbounded. Nessa was sitting in the school-room window watching the children on the lawn, and she saw him try his process of consolation

The children were talking together apparently about Frankie's going, for they looked exceedingly gloomy. Royal gamboled round the group trying to coax first one and then another to play with him. Winnie at last knelt down and throwing one arm round his neck seemed to be telling him their troubles. He stood quite still for a moment looking into her face. Then he sprang away, and stood wagging his tail and looking back so roguishly that Winnie was proof against him no longer.

She bounded after him, and in another minute was lying on the ground with Royal standing over her, playfully hitting him with her little brown fists, while he rolled her from side to side with his muzzle. The others rushed forward, and Royal in his turn was rolled over on the grass. He was up in a minute, and ready to revenge himself. The children's grievance was forgotten, and with merry peals of laughter they raced from side to side of the lawn, over the empty flower-beds, up to the house, down to the river's edge, — one minute attacking, the next running away from the dog.

But suddenly in the midst of the laughter there came a great splash in the river, and a sharp cry arose from three or four of the children:

"Fetch her, Royal; fetch her!"

Nessa knew that the river was not very deep; but the children were excited, and in one of the pools if they lost their heads —— In an instant she was on the bank. Quick as she was Royal was quicker. By the time she reached the children Winnie was standing dripping wet upon the grass — laughing, panting, sputtering the water out of her mouth, and rubbing it out of her eyes, while the others crowded round Royal with many exclamations of delight.

Nessa's anxious face was received with peals of laughter. She asked Winnie if she were hurt, but at that Winnie only laughed the more, till at last Rosie explained:

"She didn't tumble in; she did it on purpose. We wanted to see whether Royal would fetch her out."

"And then he did!"

"Isn't he a beauty! Did you ever know such a perfect dog?"

"It's just the same as if he had saved her life, because he thought she'd tumbled in by accident!"

"Murtagh said Newfoundland dogs would! Oh, Winnie, you are lucky to have him for your own."

"There now, Miss Rosie; who was right, you or Murtagh?"

"Did he bite, Winnie?"

All the children were speaking at once, pouring out a volley of cross questions and remarks, interspersed with laughter and caresses of Royal. But they managed to hear Nessa, as trying to forget her fright she replied laughingly:

"You are a set of reckless monkeys; come in and do penance now by changing your clothes."

And while Murtagh, Bobbo, and Rosie began all at once eagerly to describe what happened, Winnie, with little rivers running down from every fold of her dress and every lock of her hair, led the way towards the house.

Both her hands were occupied with trying to pull her clinging petticoats away from her knees in order to enable her to walk, but Royal trotted gravely beside her, looking at her from time to time to make sure she was not hurt, and wagging his tail with satisfaction as she lavished upon him every extravagant epithet of endearment that came to her lips. Donnie's feelings when she saw the wet frocks, for with hugging Royal the other children were nearly as wet as Winnie, did not disturb anybody in the least. They all knew what Donnie's scoldings meant; and as soon as they had changed into dry clothes they came down as merry as ever to crown Royal king of the school-room.

It was, however, only a transient gleam of brightness. They went out again after tea while Frankie was at dinner, but they found the merry fit was over. The gloom of Frankie's approaching departure surrounded them. Their attempt at a game was a failure, and they soon wandered in again to watch for him as he came out of the dining-room.

The evening passed sadly. Frankie was tired and depressed; Cousin Jane reproaching herself for having waited till so late in the season to take Frankie to Torquay, and unable to conceal her anxiety at the prospect of the approaching voyage; the children gloomily indignant.

Nessa was astonished that in Frankie's condition there could be any question of persisting in the journey. But though the doctor had said with that saddest of all kindness that he might stay if he wished it, Cousin Jane determinately persuaded herself that he was only worse because he had stayed too long in Ireland, and she clung with all a mother's desperate hope to the journey that was to work wonders for her boy. Poor Cousin Jane!—she would not, she could not understand the grief that was coming upon her.

By reason of the inconvenient hours of the trains the traveling party was obliged to start at an early hour in the morning, and at six o'clock the children were up to see it off.

The hall fire had not yet been made up for the day; yesterday's gray embers smouldered in the hearth; and in the dreary light of the one lamp Brown had put in the hall they stood and watched the boxes being brought down. The door was open, outside it was still dark, and a fine rain was falling which made the raw morning air damp and unpleasantly cold.

The children shivered as they waited, but Cousin Jane did not keep them long. She came down first with Frankie to let him say good-by to his cousins while Emma was occupied with last preparations. Poor Cousin Jane's natural good nature triumphed at the last moment. She seemed to have provided herself with half-crowns innumerable, and as she kissed all the children she insisted on shoveling big silver pieces into their hands. She said she hoped at all events to bring Frankie back for a long visit in the spring, and as she bid Murtagh good-by she added warmly:

"I am very sorry you 're not coming with us, Murtagh, and I 'm sure Frankie 's as sorry as you are. Well, it 's not my fault; I 'd a great deal rather have taken you than have you all disappointed."

The last words were perhaps more true than judicious, but at the moment Emma came down, and Cousin Jane went to arrange the carriage for Frankie.

It turned out to be a long process, and while the others gathered round the carriage Frankie stood with Murtagh and Winnie in the deep window recess, silently looking out at the wet steps and the dark figures faintly illuminated by the yellow light of the carriage-lamps.

The three little hearts were very full, but not a word was spoken till at last Cousin Jane called: "Come now, sonnie! we 're nearly ready."

At the sound of her voice Frankie turned slowly away from the window; then, throwing his arms round Murtagh's neck, he kissed him passionately three or four times. "Good-by," he whispered, "good-by!" But there seemed to be something else he wanted to say. His deep brown eyes were fixed upon Murtagh's face with a wistful, yearning earnestness that made Murtagh, with one of his sudden impulses of tenderness, pass his arm round Frankie's neck and whisper: "Never mind, you 'll soon come back!"

Winnie, who had been watching the preparations with a half-angry feeling, suddenly felt a choking lump rise in her throat. She took one of Frankie's hands, but Frankie seemed scarcely to notice her, and drawing a long breath he continued in a rapid whisper:

"Myrrh, I must tell you now, because perhaps this is the last. I think I 'm dying; and I 'm very glad, because you 'll be much richer. They told me about it when they wanted me to get well. And if I die before I come back you 're to have my pony, and Winnie has Royal. And—and you won't forget all about me, because I do love you so!" His voice faltered, and neither Winnie nor Murtagh could speak. "I will always remember you there," he added in a still lower whisper, "being dead can't make me forget."

One last silent kiss from both the children, and he went slowly towards the carriage trying to hide his emotion from his mother and sister. Murtagh and Winnie forgot that any one was there, and tears trickled unheeded over their cheeks as they stood together on the threshold watching the little wasted figure descend the steps.

Royal was standing by the carriage. He understood the meaning of the boxes, and looked wistfully from his little master to Winnie as if uncertain which to forsake. Frankie stooped and kissed him. "Good-by, Royal," he said; "you are hers now; mind you take good care of her. Winnie," with a faint attempt to smile as he turned again to his cousins, "I know you 'll take good care of him."

The carriages drove away, and Brown not noticing the two children shut the hall door. They stood on the wet steps looking through the darkness at the swiftly disappearing lights. They were too shocked and, as it were, stunned by Frankie's words to be able to realize all at once what they meant; but slowly, slowly, the full meaning dawned upon them. They were never to see little Frankie again. They had said their last good-by.

"Win, it can't be true! it can't be true!" exclaimed Murtagh.

"Oh, Myrrh, isn't it *dreadful* being children?" cried Winnie. "We can't go with him. Oh, I do hate Mr. Plunkett. I do hate him, so I do!" And Winnie, who seldom cried, threw herself down on the steps in a passion of tears.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THE end was nearer than even the doctors had expected. Frankie caught cold on the journey, and two or three days after his departure a broken-hearted letter came from his poor mother saying that they were at an hotel in Dublin; they could get no further, for Frankie was dangerously ill. It was the first time she had ever admitted that there was danger in his illness, and when Mr. Blair gave the letter to Nessa to read, he said: "It was a matter of months before, now I am afraid it is a matter of days. Poor Jane!"

Poor Jane, indeed! Even while Mr. Blair was speaking, she was sitting in dumb despair in the darkened hotel bed-room holding her dead son's hand in hers. The end had come, the end of all her brightest hopes, the end of all her tenderest affections. Suddenly, — in a moment. And already of the old sweet time nothing was left but memory. How could she believe it? Ah, poor Jane, poor Jane!

But at Castle Blair they did not yet know this, and neither Mr. Blair nor Nessa had thought it necessary to communicate to the children the bad news they had received of little Frankie's state. On the contrary, Nessa kindly devoted herself to cheering and amusing them in order that they might feel as little as possible the disappointment of not accompanying their cousin.

And though she was little accustomed to the society of children, she had a wonderfully practical way of doing whatever she made up her mind had to be done. What she did she seemed to do by a sort of instinct, much as the birds sing, and the flowers grow; and somehow she generally succeeded.

In this instance she succeeded marvelously. Winnie and Murtagh began to forget the trouble into which Frankie's words had thrown them. When they were alone and quiet it came back to them, but they had repeated to no one what he had said, and somehow in the midst of all their occupations the words began to seem unreal. The trouble of Pat's absence was there too down underneath, but Nessa did not speak at all of those things. She laughed with the children, went for walks with them, took an interest in their occupations, and began as she said to reform them. She just wanted to divert their thoughts.

So it happened that three or four days after Frankie's departure, the children having been with Nessa and Royal for a scramble across the fields, came in quite rosy with racing, and in a mood to think of some improvements that they desired to make in the fire-place of the island hut.

"There's no time like the present," said Murtagh, and as the others were of his opinion they left Nessa to enter the house alone, and started off with Royal to spend the rest of the afternoon upon the island.

Nessa was glad to be alone. Good-natured as she was she was too little accustomed to children's society not to be a little fatigued by it, and to-day especially, for though she had not chosen to seem one bit less bright, she had thought often of Cousin Jane's sad letter about little Frankie.

She was thinking of it again now as she stood by the school-room window. The park was in dreary unison with depressed thoughts, for dying leaves hung damply to the branches, and mists were already rising to close the short day; winter had almost come. But Nessa did not pay much attention to the landscape. She was thinking of the bright gentle little boy who had so lately been with them, and she too felt awed at the thought of death. But she could not believe that he would die; it seemed impossible, it was such a short time since he had been there talking and laughing with them all. His mother's anxiety made her think him worse than he was, and Uncle Blair always saw things sadly.

Nessa could not believe in sadness. No, no, it would not be, he would get well, he could not die when his mother loved him so. So she persuaded herself; but when, after standing a long while by the window she happened to look out, the gray dampness of the landscape made her shudder, she did not quite know why, and with a sudden impulsive movement she pulled down the blind. She came over to the fire and poked it into a blaze. Poor little fellow! But, yes, she felt certain he would get well. In Dublin he would be near the best doctors. That glimpse she had had of dim rolling sward with skeleton trees standing out against a heavy sky, had produced a singular effect; she could not quite shake it off; but it was foolish to be influenced by such things; she would get a book to read, and think no more about it.

She rang for Peggy to put the room in order, and went up-stairs to take her things off and to fetch a book A quarter of an hour later she was comfortably established on the big brown sofa by the fire, and her unpleasant impressions were forgotten in a book that interested her immensely.

It was an odd book for her to be charmed by, but coming upon it the other day in the library she had stood nearly an hour by the book-case reading on from where she had opened, and though she had not been able to look at it since, she had not forgotten the almost painful charm it had had for her. It was only a collection of stories taken from Italian history. Nothing more unlikely to please her could well have been imagined. Three months ago she would have turned from it with a sort of horror; but a new side of her nature had been awakened since she had been in Ireland; and the wildness, the enthusiasm, the restless, passionate courage, roughly but vividly described in the pages of this book, responded not to new wants arising in her mind, but to new sympathies.

What she had opened on to-day was an account of the conquest of Sicily by Charles of Anjou. It told of the bitter slavery of the people, of the heroic efforts of Giovanni di Procida to free his beloved country, and then of the irresistible passion bursting out at last on the day of the Sicilian Vespers. Nessa would not have understood it a little while ago. Now she read with such absorbed attention that she forgot everything in this world save Sicilian wrongs.

But as she was coming to the very climax of the story she was startled out of her abstraction by Peggy's entrance with a tray of rattling tea-things.

"It wants ten minutes of dinner-time, Miss," remarked that maiden in a tone of respectful admonition.

"What!" exclaimed Nessa. "The whole afternoon gone already. And the children, too, they have not come in."

But there was no time for exclamations; climax or no climax, the nine pages that remained of her book had to be left till after dinner; and, as it was, her evening toilette had to be made with a truly fairy-like rapidity.

She was growing accustomed now to the erratic ways of her little cousins, and did not trouble herself about their prolonged absence. Even when after dinner she returned to the school-room and found tea still untouched, she only concluded that their fire-place had taken longer to build than they had expected.

Her mind was still full of her book, and having piled fresh wood upon the fire she settled down contentedly to finish it.

The children left her just time. She was reading the last lines, when a banging of doors, a sudden clatter of little feet across the hall, a confusion of voices and laughter mixed with the short playful barks of a dog, announced that they were coming. The next minute Bobbo burst open the school-room door and rushed in, followed by the two girls, all rosy—laughing, panting, and all trying to talk at the same time. Royal jumped round them and barked in chorus, till the sounds became so mixed that it was difficult to say who was barking and who was talking.

"Down, Royal; be quiet, my beauty!" cried Winnie at last, while Bobbo exclaimed: "Oh, Nessa, we 've had such fun, and Royal behaved so splendidly. You never saw such a dog. He does every single thing Winnie tells. He 's the best king of our tribe we could possibly have; he flew at them like—— Oh, it was glorious to see how they ran."

Here all the children again tried to tell what had happened, and Bobbo's voice was lost in the Babel that ensued.

Nessa had shut up her book on their entrance, and laughingly put her hands to her ears.

"How can I hear a single word," she exclaimed, "if you all talk at once?"

"All right; give me something to eat and I 'll be as quiet as a lamb," cried Bobbo, sitting down to the tea-table as he spoke and seizing upon some bread and butter. "Gollyloo! I *am* starving."

"But do just listen," cried Winnie. "It was such fun to see them. You'd have thought Royal was a wild bea— Oh, where's the milk!" she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself. "He must have some supper."

"Here's the milk," said Nessa. "And where is Murtagh? And what is it that Royal has done?"

"Oh, Murtagh! He's coming; he'll be here in a minute. Well—we were on the island, and we'd got some big stones out of the river, and we were building away when we heard some one coming. First we thought it was you, and we thought that was jolly, so we called out: 'Here we are, awfully busy. Are you going to help us?' But then Royal jumped up and began to growl, and a man called back again: 'I think we'll help ye with the wrong sides of our shovels;' and lo and behold! there were two of the men—Hickey and that red-headed donkey, Phelim,—with picks and shovels on their shoulders, and would you like to know what they wanted?"

Nessa looked her surprise and attention, but did not even attempt to guess the preposterous design.

"To pull down our hut!" shouted all the children together. "Our own very hut that we've had ever since we came here!"

Bobbo opportunely choked over a mouthful of toast, and Rosie patted his back, while Winnie, seizing the chance, continued: "Did you ever hear of such a thing in your life? There was a wall to be mended somewhere, they said, and Mr. Plunkett had told them to take the stones from our hut. But we soon let them see their mistake. We told them they might go to London for their stones if they liked, but they weren't going to have one of ours. Phelim began to laugh in his stupid, aggravating way, and he said: 'Oh, ay, we've found our master now, you know, and what he says has got to be. The quality is no account at all now alongside o' the agents.'

"So then Murtagh started up from the fire-place and he came to the door, and he said: 'All the agents in Ireland may go to the bottom of the sea for all I care. But if you touch one stone of this hut I 'll set the dog upon you.' And Royal knew quite well what Murtagh was saying, for he wagged his tail and looked as pleased as possible. Phelim was frightened; but Hickey said he couldn 't help it, and he came up nearer to the hut; and Murtagh called out to him to stay where he was. And Royal growled; he growled just like a *bear*, so he did. And Hickey would come on. So then Murtagh and me called out, 'At them, Royal; good dog!' and he sprang straight at them.

"They both turned and ran; but just as they got to the edge of the island he seized Phelim, and down he went with him into the river. Oh, Nessa, if you could have seen Phelim!" continued Winnie with a merry peal of laughter. "His great red head went down and his heels went up; there was a tremendous splashing and gurgling, and then he roared! he roared just like a child, at the very top of his voice, and Royal — Royal laughed at him! he did, really, upon my word; we all saw him; he regularly shook himself with laughing; because he got out of the water and stood on the bank, and Phelim sat there in the river just roaring till — till ——" But the remembrance of the scene made Winnie laugh so much that her words became incoherent.

"Till Hickey pulled him out, and they both took themselves off," said Murtagh's voice behind her.

"And Royal?" said Nessa, laughing.

"Oh," said Winnie, recovering herself, "Royal was too much of a gentleman to have anything more to say to him, only when Hickey was going to help him up, Royal ran at Hickey; so then Hickey took to his heels, and so did Phelim, and Royal just stood on the shore and barked and barked as much as to say, 'You know what you have to expect if you come worrying my tribe.' Didn't you, my beauty?" and Winnie's story ended with a hug to Royal as she knelt down before him with his supper.

"But you had better take care," said Nessa, "or you will be getting Royal into trouble."

"Oh," said Winnie, "that doesn't matter. You 're my own, aren't you, my precious one, and nobody can touch you without my leave."

While Winnie continued to speak, Murtagh had flung himself silently into a great arm-chair by the window, and Nessa saw by his face and manner that he was in one of his proud, angry moods. She attended to the wants of the other children who were ravenously hungry, and then seeing that he did not stir, she said: "Your tea is poured out, Murtagh."

"I don't want any tea, thank you," replied Murtagh from the depths of his arm-chair.

Then ashamed, perhaps, of the tone in which he had spoken, he sprang up and came to the table.

"But let me cut the bread and butter for them," he said, taking the loaf from her, "see what red marks the knife makes on your hands." He looked up as he spoke with a pleasant smile.

"Did you ever know any one like Mr. Plunkett?" remarked Rosie at the same moment. "Just imagine him wanting to take the stones of our hut!"

"He 's not going to get them," said Murtagh shortly, his brow clouding over again.

"It 's the most ridiculous idea I ever heard in my life!" exclaimed Winnie, — "knock down our hut that we 've had ever since we 've been here, to mend some silly old wall. They 'll be knocking down this house next to build up Mr. Plunkett's. I think they 've all gone mad."

"And besides," said Murtagh, "papa built that hut with his own hands when he was a little boy. He told us all about it before we came here. Pat O'Toole's father helped him, and they collected every single stone that 's in it one by one out of the river. It took them more than six months getting all the stones, and building."

"Why don't you tell that to Uncle Blair?" said Nessa. "You may be quite sure nobody remembers who built it, or they would not pull it down to mend a wall. Shall I tell him for you this evening and ask him to explain to Mr. Plunkett?"

Murtagh's face relaxed a little, and Rosie exclaimed:

"Oh yes, do; then that will prevent another fight with Mr. Plunkett, and we shan't be all so miserably uncomfortable. I think it 's much nicer to be a peaceful tribe. It is so like savages, fighting and fighting."

"Listen to Rosie talking good!" burst out Winnie contemptuously. "Do you suppose Nessa means we ought to try and not fight just to make ourselves more comfortable?"

Rosie reddened, but made some sharp reply, and then ensued one of their ordinary sparring matches, while Nessa paying no attention to them was busy at the fire toasting a slice of bread.

The sparring passed into a din of continuous remarks which every one made and nobody listened to; but Murtagh stood silent cutting bread till Nessa returned from the fire and a plate of buttered toast was laid on the table beside him, with a smiling, "After all, I believe you are hungry, Murtagh." Then he took a bit of toast, and continued in the same tone as his last remark:

"Papa knows the shape of every one of the biggest stones. He made a picture for us once of the inside of the hut, and he used to tell us stories in the evenings when there wasn't any one there, about his adventures when he went in the river looking for stones."

"And you know that three-cornered white one, just a little bit on the right-hand side, inside the door!" cried Winnie. "Well, he was very nearly drowned getting that. They thought he was drowned first, only Grannie O'Toole got him round (she's dead now, you know), and they never told papa's papa and mamma for fear they mightn't let him go in the river for any more."

"And then," said Murtagh, his anger rising again at the remembrance, "they think they're going to get it to put in some beastly wall. But Mr. Plunkett's greatly mistaken if he supposes I'm going to let him touch a single one of papa's stones."

"Not while we have Royal to protect us," said Winnie. "I'd rather stay up there day and night."

"There's one thing," put in Bobbo, "even if he did get the stones we could knock the wall down and take them back and hide them."

"He'll get a good many duckings from Royal before he gets a stone out of the hut," returned Murtagh fiercely. "And if he's held under a little too long by mistake it would be a good riddance," he added half under his breath.

"Murtagh!" exclaimed Nessa almost involuntarily, but in a tone that expressed her dismay.

"I *can't* help it," returned Murtagh, "he makes me feel —" And the tone of Murtagh's voice finished his sentence for him.

Nessa looked at him; she could not understand this energy of hate. But notwithstanding his anger there was in his face something so forlorn that she felt more sorry for him than shocked.

"Come and sit by the fire, and let us try and forget all about him just for the present. It is no use to talk about him, is it?" she said kindly. Murtagh flashed back a bright grateful glance as he responded to her invitation by throwing himself upon the hearth-rug, but he did not speak, and his brow soon clouded over again. Nessa began to chat with the others; but she wished to keep the conversation clear of Mr. Plunkett, and all subjects interesting to the children had a fatal tendency to come back to him sooner or later. The safest thing to do was to talk of herself.

"Do you know what I have been doing all this afternoon?" she remarked presently. "I have been reading the most wonderful — But no, you shall just guess. Guess what it was about."

"Easy to guess," said Winnie, "if you got it out of the library. Some horrible dry stuff or other out of a book a yard long. Don't you know what grown-up people always read?"

"No, it wasn't," said Nessa. "The book was not bigger than one of your story books, and—"

"Horrid squinny little print, then, and yellow paper all over stains," replied Winnie laughing and unceremoniously interrupting. "*I* know Uncle Blair's books; they make one feel dusty to look at them."

"No, it wasn't," replied Nessa shaking her head. "It had—well, yes, it had a dreadfully ugly binding, but lovely white paper."

"Long S's," suggested Murtagh, making the remark because it occurred to him, but showing no desire to enter into the conversation.

"Oh yes, yes," cried Winnie. "Long S's, and funny little pictures of girls with parasols over their heads and trousers down to their boots. Now wasn't it, Nessa?"

"No," said Nessa, laughing, "not one single long s, and the pictures were all of robber castles in the mountains, and men fighting, and women fainting, and shipwrecks, and dungeons."

"Oh, I say, how jolly!" exclaimed Bobbo. "That 's something like a book. What was it all about?"

"Couldn't you tell us some of it?" said Rosie. "It 's so nice being told stories."

"Oh yes," cried Winnie. "If it 's something dreadful do please tell us. I feel just in the very humor to put out the candles and poke up the fire and have something awful—something that 'll make our flesh regularly creep and our hair stand up."

The other children were apparently of Winnie's mind, so little Ellie was sent to bed, the table was hastily cleared to prevent Peggy coming in to interrupt, and they all gathered round the fire.

Nessa was not accustomed to story-telling, but she acquitted herself wonderfully well. Sure that the subject would charm the children, she was delighted to find something which would take them completely out of their every-day troubles. So she described at length the sunny beauty of Sicily, its fruitful fields and smiling landscapes; she pictured the charming peaceful life that the inhabitants might have led; and if she allowed her imagination to run away with her a little, she succeeded at all events in warmly interesting her audience.

Murtagh alone paid little attention. His thoughts were full of his own troubles, and he lay on his back on the hearthrug brooding over them with a bitterness that excluded every other feeling. Soon, however, Nessa came to the conquest of the island. Some sentences that he overheard aroused his interest. He began to listen, and before she had gone very far in her relation of the oppression and injustice to which the unfortunate Sicilians were then forced to submit, he had rolled himself over and was lying stretched out at her feet, his elbows planted firmly on the ground, his chin resting on his hands, and his burning black eyes fixed upon her face with an expression that might well have startled her had she seen it.

She did not see it, however; she was now quite occupied by her story, and without being aware of the fact she had become eloquent in her description of how by degrees the whole country cried out for freedom, till at last a man was found ready to devote himself to his country's cause.

Murtagh's face as she proceeded was a curious study. It seemed at first with restless indignation to reflect every passion she described, but when she began to speak of John of Procida, and entered upon his resolute and devoted efforts for the freedom of his country, there came over it an eager exalted look, a look of fixed and passionate sympathy, that never faded till she brought the story to its climax.

"I would rather read you the end," she said, pausing to look down at their flushed faces, and eager eyes, and towsled heads, ruddy in the firelight. "The book will tell it better than I can."

The book was still on the sofa; she had only to open it. The children, all wondering what was to come next, were too much interested to speak, and she read:

"In the year 1282, Easter Monday fell on the 30th of March. It was a beautiful spring day, and the people of Palermo, according to their custom on holidays, flocked out in hundreds to the meadows in the direction of the church of Montreal, intending to hear vespers and to witness also the marriage of a beautiful young girl, the daughter of one Roger Mastrangelo.

"Mixed among the crowd of Sicilians were many Frenchmen who had come out intending also to see the marriage and to join in the games that were to fill the evening. But, as usual, the French were behaving roughly to the Sicilian men and impudently to the women, causing the Sicilian faces to look black and angry.

"It was one of the vexatious laws of the French that no Sicilian should carry arms, and presently a Frenchman cried out:

"'These rebellious Paterins must have arms hidden upon them or they would never dare to look so sulky. Let us search them.'

"The idea was instantly caught up, and in another moment the festival would have been disturbed by a general search, when an admiring murmur running through the crowd turned all thoughts to another direction. The bride was coming, and every one turned to look.

"Dressed in her pretty wedding finery, her gold ornaments glinting in the sunlight, she leaned upon her father's arm, while her lover and the friends who were asked to the wedding walked behind. Every one moved out of her way, the crowds round the church door opened a pathway in their midst for her to walk through, and blushing and smiling she advanced toward the church. Suddenly a Frenchman stepped out of the crowd, and crying out with a coarse laugh, 'I daresay she has got arms hidden about her somewhere,' he tore open her dress and thrust his hand into her bosom. Terrified and insulted the poor girl fainted into her lover's arms, but her father sprang upon the offender, and tearing his sword from him stabbed him with it, crying as he did so; 'Let the French die.'

"Then every Sicilian in the place echoed the shout, 'Let the French die.' They had broken at last from their slavery, and more like wild beasts than men they took their revenge. In a moment the French were overpowered. Their arms were dragged from them and they were killed with their own swords. Back into the town went the Sicilians shouting everywhere, 'Let the French die,' and before they laid down their arms that evening they had killed four thonsand."

Murtagh's eyes were fixed eagerly upon Nessa, and as her voice ceased he drew himself up suddenly on to his knees and exclaimed:

"Oh, how I wish I had been there! I *would* have fought with all my might and main against those mean French thieves. Did John of Procida succeed in the end?"

"Yes," said Nessa. As she answered she looked at him and was startled by the almost feverish interest of his face. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright, and he continued with rapid passionate utterance:

"How could they bear it so long? How could they live not free in their own beautiful country? But John of Procida was true, he was brave, he knew that it is better to die than to live like slaves."

Murtagh was not speaking to any one. His words poured out one after the other as though the feeling in his mind had unconsciously framed itself into speech. What a strange excitable nature it was! Nessa half wished that she had not told him the story as she looked at him kneeling there in the fire-light with that fierce fervent look upon his face.

The other children looked at him in surprise; his enthusiasm had astonished them too.

"Why, Murtagh," said Rosie, "how awfully hot you look! your cheeks are as red as fire."

"Yes," said Nessa, bending forward and arranging with her fingers his hair that was standing up on end, "I think you are quite excited by my story."

"If you please, Miss," said Brown's respectfully subdued voice at the door, "tea has been in the drawing-room for a quarter of an hour, and Mr. Blair desired me to let you know."

Murtagh started up.

"Why, Nessa, I had no idea it was so late!" he said, with a certain amount of ordinary surprise in his voice, but his eyes still full of suppressed excitement. "Good night," and without more words he went.

His abrupt departure disturbed Nessa; she feared that with the intention of distracting his thoughts she had really excited him too much; and more than once while she chatted with her uncle that evening she found herself wondering whether Murtagh were asleep yet. A good night's rest would be the best remedy for all his troubles.

Her disquietude would not have lessened if she had been able to see into Murtagh's mind.

He had entered the school-room in a tumult of rage, indignation, and rebellion. Bitterly repentant for the scene in the haggart which had caused so much unhappiness, he believed that it was nothing but deliberate persecution on Mr. Plunkett's part to pretend still to consider him guilty. He could not imagine that any one could really think him capable of such a tissue of lies, of such abominable cowardice as his guilt would now imply; and there was something that roused all his indignation in the idea that Mr. Plunkett saw now a good opportunity for crushing him and was determined to hit him hard while he was down. It was cruel, unjust, ungenerous. "Why does he do it?" Murtagh had cried passionately to himself, "Why does he do it? I shall do something dreadful some day, I know I shall, if he goes on like this."

With his wild little heart stirred to these depths he had listened to Nessa's story. The barbaric independence, the despairing savage struggle for freedom of the oppressed and devoted Sicilians, had appealed to his imagination in a way that it would have done at no other time. His own spirit seemed to be put in action; his wrongs were somehow merged in theirs; and in the tempest of their vengeance he was whirled along, feeling almost as though he too were at last taking just revenge for all the injuries that rankled in his mind. The fierce, almost savage, satisfaction that he felt, would have horrified himself had he not been so strangely moved; but for nearly the whole of the last month he had been living in a state of high pressure which could not fail to have some strong effect. He had alternated between extremes of violent passion and heroic resolve, and his mind was torn and shaken by the storm.

Alone in his room he walked up and down in the darkness, absently undressing, and dropping the various articles of his clothing upon the floor. Absorbed as he was he could not have told his thoughts; they scarcely were thoughts at all; his mind was carried along by some stronger power. Nessa's story possessed him; he was living in that, and confusedly mixed up with it was the indignant remembrance of his own troubles.

At last he threw himself upon his bed, but too excited to sleep he tossed and turned for hours, seeing over and over again in the darkness all the details of the story. Unconsciously he fell into imagining himself the leader of the Sicilians; he felt the enthusiasm and the savage joy that must have burned in them. His cheeks grew hot, his eyes flashed, as with vivid fancy he saw the fighting round him; the only thing worth doing in this world seemed to be to die for freedom, and through all the excitement there flashed across his mind, from time to time, a feeling of something like impatient despair at the thought that there was nothing for him to do.

CHAPTER XXV.

TOWARDS morning Murtagh fell into a disturbed sleep; but almost before daybreak he was awakened by Bobbo, who exclaimed as he shook him by the shoulder:

"Get up, Myrrh! We'd better be on the island early if we want to save the hut."

In an instant Murtagh was out of bed. Save the hut! whatever else he might give in about he would never relinquish that, — their father's hut.

The passionate thoughts of the night before had now assumed the tangible form of a dogged determination to resist Mr. Plunkett, and a pleasant sense of anticipated triumph tingled through his veins as he hurriedly dressed himself. All the miserable abasement of yesterday's anger was gone. He was going to fight now!

With his head thrown back and a confident determined look upon his face he ran down the stairs, saying to Bobbo: "Call the girls, while I fetch Royal. We shall see who'll be master this time!"

Before it was fully light the four children were on the island. Rosie, with practical forethought, had possessed herself of such scraps of food as she could find in the kitchen and servants' hall, and now they lighted a fire and sat down by it to eat their miscellaneous breakfast.

"But what are you going to do, Murtagh?" inquired Rosie, with a note of fretful disappointment in her voice. It really was an unkind fate which had made her the sister of such a brother. She had not the least taste for adventures.

"You'll see when the time comes," replied Murtagh, whose ideas were in truth very vague. He felt only sure of one thing, which was that he meant to do something.

"I don't mind what it is," said Winnie; "I'm ready for anything!"

"So am I," said Bobbo, "only I vote we don't hurt the poor beggars if we can help it."

"No; because it's not their fault you know, Myrrh," decided Winnie.

"No; but we can't let them land here!" replied Murtagh determinately. "If they will get hurt we can't help it. Now look here, we had better collect a lot of bits of wood, and clods, and things, and pile them up in front here, where we can get at them easily. They are sure to come up this front way."

"Oh," cried Winnie in delight, "you're going to pelt them! Then let us get some of that stiff, yellow mud from the bank. It will do gloriously!"

But their warlike preparations seemed likely to be quite unnecessary. Time passed quietly on. No one came to disturb the peace of the island, and the children were beginning to think they might have spared themselves the trouble of their early watch, when the loose rattle of cart-wheels was heard coming along the road on the left bank of the river.

"Here they come!" cried Murtagh, springing from his seat by the fire and hurrying out to reconnoitre.

The others hastily followed. Through a gap in the bushes they saw two empty carts coming down the road. The driver of each was seated on the shaft smoking a short pipe, and in the corner of one of the carts were visible the handles of picks and mallets.

"Yes," exclaimed Murtagh, "it's them. Now we're in for it! Royal, old boy, are you ready?"

The faces of the other children beamed with excitement. Royal understood well enough that something unusual was the matter, for he answered Murtagh's appeal by a short yap and a pricking up of his ears which meant business. Even Rosie was so carried away by the excitement of the approaching battle as to exclaim in sympathy with Winnie's dancing eyes, "Isn't jolly?"

The carts stopped on the road, and the men taking their tools began leisurely to descend through the little wood into the bed of the river.

"Now then, steady!" said Murtagh. "I 'll talk to them first." He advanced as he spoke along the little path, and standing at the edge of the river he called out in a loud firm voice to know what they wanted.

The men were evidently somewhat discomfited at finding the island already occupied, and Hickey replied evasively: "Sure, Mr. Murtagh, we didn't expect to find you up here."

"What do you want here?" repeated Murtagh.

"Well, Mr. Plunkett 's sent us for a load o' them stones; and you know orders is orders, so you 'll let us have them quiet, like a good young gentleman, won't you now? Ye 've hed ye're bit o' play yesterday evenin', and there 's no gettin' on with work when ye 're hindered that way!"

"I told you yesterday that you shouldn't touch our hut," replied Murtagh, "and you shan't! Mr. Plunkett may get his stones from the quarry."

"It 's no good standin' blathering here!" exclaimed Phelim roughly. "We 've got to have the stones, and there 's an end of it! Come on, Hickey; we got the measure of Mr. Plunkett's tongue last night, and I don't want no more of it!"

"Take that for your impudence!" cried Bobbo, who without waiting for more snatched a stick from the heap of missiles and flung it at Phelim's head.

The stick flew harmlessly past, but a shout from the other children echoed Bobbo's words, and a rapid volley of mud-balls, sticks, and clods of earth saluted the onward advance of the men. So true was the aim, and so hard and fast did the children pelt, that Hickey and Phelim ran for shelter round the point of the island, and tried to effect a landing on the other side.

But on the other side the water was deeper, and the only standing-room was on a belt of shingle close to the shore of the island. The children knew this well, and when the men emerged upon it from behind the protecting screen of bushes they were greeted with such a shower of missiles, that Phelim, whose courage had been considerably undermined by the sound of Royal's excited barking, turned and fled blindly into the water.

As he lost his footing and rolled over in the water deep enough to souse him completely, the children raised a prolonged shout of triumph, and redoubled their efforts to dislodge Hickey, who, while returning their attack with whatever he could lay his hands on, was good-humoredly swearing at them and imploring them to stop their fun.

Suddenly in the midst of all the hubbub, over the noise of the children's shouting, Royal's barking, Hickey's swearing, Phelim's lamenting, a stern—"What 's the meaning of all this uproar ?" made itself heard, and Mr. Plunkett in shooting costume burst through the bushes on the right bank of the river.

Missiles were flying in every direction, and the only immediate answer to Mr. Plunkett's question was a mud ball, which hit him on the forehead, and a stick that carried away his hat.

He put his hand angrily to his head, and losing all his habitual command of language, exclaimed: "What the devil do you mean by this ?"

"We mean," cried Murtagh, who was perfectly wild with excitement, "that we won't have our rights interfered with, and you may just as well know, once for all, that we won't have this hut touched if all the walls in Ireland go unmended."

"Don't be impertinent to me, sir; you 'll have whatever you are told to have," returned Mr. Plunkett hotly.

"Where are you going?" he inquired of the men, who, taking advantage of the cessation of active hostilities, were slinking off towards the carts.

"Please, sir, them stones is no good at all at all," Hickey ventured in answer; "they 're all rubbish, every one of them, not worth the carting."

"I didn't ask your opinion of the stones. I told you to fetch them. A set of lazy scoundrels! I believe you're every one of you in league to prevent anything being decently done," exclaimed Mr. Plunkett.

"League or no league, the hut shall not be touched!" reiterated Murtagh.

"We shall very soon see that," returned Mr. Plunkett. "Go on to the island, and pull it down at once," he added, turning to the men. "I stand here till the work is begun."

"I'll set the dog on the first one of you who attempts to land," said Murtagh resolutely.

"Do you hear what I say to you?" demanded Mr. Plunkett, as the men stood doubtfully eyeing Royal, who, apparently enraged by Phelim's appearance, was furiously barking.

"Please, sir, the dog's very savage; he nearly killed Phelim last night," said Hickey apologetically.

"You pair of cowards! do you mean to tell me you are afraid of the dog?" exclaimed Mr. Plunkett contemptuously.

The men did not answer, but neither did they show the slightest inclination to move, and Winnie called out derisively: "How much for standing there till the work is begun?"

"Do you wish me to begin it myself?" demanded Mr. Plunkett angrily of the two men. "I tell you that hut has to be pulled down before I leave this spot."

He moved along the bank as he spoke, and prepared to jump on to a little island of shingle that lay in the bed of the stream.

"If you come one step nearer I'll set Royal upon you," cried Murtagh, roused to the last pitch of defiance by Mr. Plunkett's determination.

He and Winnie were both of them holding on to Royal's collar, and it was only with difficulty that they could restrain the dog, who seemed ready to attack anything and everything in his excitement.

"If you set your wild dog upon me I give you fair warning that I will shoot him," retorted Mr. Plunkett.

"As if you dare!" cried Winnie incredulously.

Mr. Plunkett's only answer was to spring on to the shingle.

"At him, Royal!" cried Winnie and Murtagh in a breath, loosing their hold as they spoke. With a furious growl Royal bounded into the river. Almost instantaneously Mr. Plunkett raised his gun. There was a loud report, then a piteous whine; the little cloud of smoke cleared away; there was a broad red streak in the water; and Royal turned his dying eyes reproachfully to Winnie.

"Oh, Murtagh! He's done it, he's done it!" she cried, with a beseeching disbelief in her voice that went even to Mr. Plunkett's heart, and though the water was over her ankles she dashed across to the shingle bank.

"Help me to take him out, Murtagh. Don't you see the water's carrying him down? He can't help himself. Royal, darling, I didn't mean it; I didn't think he would. Where are you hurt? oh, why can't you speak?"

The current swept the dog towards her, she managed to throw her arms round his neck and to get his head rested upon her shoulder, while Bobbo and Murtagh going in to her assistance tried to lift his body. But he groaned so piteously at their somewhat clumsy attempt that they stopped, and all three stood still, and in speechless dismay watched the wounded dog. Royal seemed more content, and from his resting-place on Winnie's shoulder licked away the tears that were rolling down her face. But after a time the children's wet feet began to grow numb, and Winnie looked up and signed to Murtagh to try and move him now.

He groaned again. For a moment he seemed to struggle convulsively, his head fell off Winnie's shoulder, his eyes looked up appealingly to hers, his limbs suddenly straightened, and then he was quite quiet as the children supported him through the water, and tried tenderly to lift him on to the bank. He was too heavy for them, and Mr. Plunkett, his hot anger past, came forward saying almost humbly, "Let me help you;" but though the children none of them answered, they turned their faces from him in such an unmistakable manner that he fell back and signed to one of the men to go and help them in his place.

Thus Royal was lifted on to the right bank of the river; and Winnie, sitting on the ground, took his head into her lap, while Murtagh, Bobbo, and Rosie stood round and watched. But he never moved nor groaned; he was so unnaturally still that a dim terror entered into the children's minds. Winnie stooped down to kiss him; as she did so her fear became a certainty.

"Murtagh," she said, raising a white frightened face. "He—he 's killed him."

Murtagh made no answer, but falling on his knees beside Royal he laid his cheek against the dog's muzzle to feel if there were any breath. Then his mournful eyes and sad shake of the head confirmed Winnie's words. Mr. Plunkett and the two men had known it for some minutes, but as Mr. Plunkett stood watching the group of children he felt a strange, unusual moisture rising to his eyes, and he turned and walked away.

As they realised that the dog was dead, really dead, Rosie and Bobbo began to cry; the other two sat dry-eyed gazing at Royal.

The men stood one side respecting their grief for a few moments, but then they came forward and began to make remarks and offer consolation.

"He was a beautiful creathure," said Hickey, "and indeed it would serve old Plunkett right if he got shot with the very same gun. But there, don't take on so, bless yer hearts; the master 'll get yez another dog as fine as ever this was."

While Pat was speaking Phelim stooped down and idly taking one of Royal's paws shook it slowly back wards and forwards. Winnie put out her hand to prevent the sacrilege, and looking up at Murtagh said "Take them away, Muatagh, all of them."

"We'd better take the dog with us and bury him," said Phelim; "a big dog like that 'll want buryin'."

"No, no," cried Murtagh, with a quick glance towards Winnie which seemed to say he would have protected her from the words if he could. "Come away, all of you, and leave her alone."

And so Winnie was left sitting on the ground with her dead dog's head resting on her lap. Bobbo and Rosie returned to the house to tell the sad news to Nessa. The two men went to find Mr. Plunkett, but Murtagh wandered away by himself into the woods higher up the river.

The men having found Mr. Plunkett at home inquired what they were to do about the hut. Was it to be taken down?

"Yes, of course," returned Mr. Plunkett testily, feeling strongly inclined to say on the contrary that it might be left standing, but ashamed of what he considered a bit of inconsequent weakness.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

MURTAGH in the mean time wandered alone through the woods above the island. The defence of the hut was quite forgotten, and every other feeling was cut short by horror. The shock of Royal's death had been so sudden, so totally inconceivable beforehand, that it was only with great difficulty he could realize it now. His mind seemed in a measure benumbed. He went backwards and forwards through the woods with his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Dead leaves fluttered down upon his bare head and lay in golden drift on either side as his feet cut furrows through the gathered layers, sunlight glinted through the branches, a few birds were singing in the clear air; but it might have been snowing for all Murtagh knew to the contrary.

Almost unconsciously a kind of instinct to be with Winnie in her trouble led his footsteps after a time back to where she had been left, and the first outward sounds which woke him from his abstraction were her violent sobs. A thin screen of branches had prevented him from seeing her as he came up, but now he looked through it and saw her lying upon the ground, her arms thrown round Royal, her face buried in his dark curly coat, and her whole body shaken with emotion.

"Royal, darling, you're not dead! You can't be dead, really!" she cried passionately. Then, as her own sobs were the only sound and Royal lay stiff and cold beneath them, she wailed out: "How could he do it? How could he murder you?"

"Win, don't cry so *dreadfully!*" cried Murtagh, breaking through the bushes and throwing himself down beside her. His own voice was choked, and he tried to put his arms round her and kiss her. But she did not lift up her face; he could find nothing but the back of her ear to kiss through her hair, and her sobs came with redoubled violence. He knelt beside her with one arm thrown over her back and looked around, feeling perfectly powerless to console her. The dull thuds of the picks and mallets which were demolishing the hut fell mechanically upon his ear, but he did not heed them.

Winnie sobbed on in utter abandonment of grief.

"Don't cry so, Win," he said again, laying his face down on her head.

After a minute Winnie replied between her sobs: "Go away, please. I'd rather be here. You can't ever make him alive again!"

For one moment she raised a face so swollen and tear-stained that Murtagh was startled at the sight of it; but shaking back her hair she dropped again into her former position with such evident desire to be alone that Murtagh got up and went slowly into the wood.

He never remembered to have seen Winnie cry so and he could not bear to think of her alone there without any comfort. He did not venture back to her again, but he wandered about near where she lay, trying to think of something to do to comfort her. And nothing seemed to be a bit of good; he never, never could make Royal alive again. Oh, that dreary, dreary day! The shadows began to lengthen, but still he stayed in the wood near Winnie, coming from time to time to peep through the branches and see if she still were there.

After a while she stopped sobbing, but she scarcely changed her position all day, and Murtagh began to feel in a state of half-frightened despair.

He did not like to speak to her, but at last he could bear it no longer, and after watching her for a long time he called almost timidly:

"Win!"

She did not move. He called her a little louder, then a third and a fourth time, but still she gave no kind of answer. His heart stood still with a vague fear, and, scarcely knowing what he expected to see, he went close and gently lifted some of the brown hair that fell in confusion over her shoulder. She was fast asleep. Her head still rested upon Royal's shaggy curls, one arm was thrown round him, and the little face looked so white upon its rough black pillow that Murtagh bent very close before he could feel sure that she was only asleep. Then he could hardly have explained the relief that he felt. He sat down to watch beside her, but after a little time he thought he would go and get Nessa to come before she wakened again, so he left her and went towards the house.

But the day was far from finished yet; there was worse to come.

As he got down into the pleasure ground he was met by Rosie, her face swollen and stained with crying.

"Oh, Murtagh!" she exclaimed. "Where have you been all day? I 've been hunting for you everywhere to tell you. Poor Frankie 's dead; it came by the telegraph to-day."

She burst out crying again as she spoke, but Murtagh did not. He looked at her blankly as though he did not take in the sense of the words, and then he said, "What?"

"Frankie's dead," she repeated, "and they never thought it would be so sudden; and oh, Murtagh, just think of his being here, — being the very last time."

"Where's Nessa?" said poor Murtagh, with a confused bewildered feeling that she would somehow contradict this.

"In the drawing-room," replied Rosie, and she turned and followed Murtagh as he walked rapidly along.

"Don't you want to cry, Murtagh?" she asked curiously after a minute, her own tears stopped by astonishment at Murtagh's way of receiving the news. "Bobbo is crying so, poor fellow, up in his own room. It is so dreadful too, isn't it, to think —" Here her tears overpowered her again and she spoke no more.

At the drawing-room door Murtagh was met by Nessa. He could not speak, and she, seeing that he knew all, just put her arms round him and kissed him tenderly.

For an instant he clung to her, and a great sob shook his body, but then he disengaged himself and looked up still dry-eyed.

"Winnie," he said; "come to her while she's asleep. And — and don't tell her, or she won't come away all night."

He turned and walked down the passage and across the hall expecting Nessa to follow him, but at the door he stopped, and looking at her dress said:

"You'll be cold. I'll go and fetch your —" He put his hands up to his temples with a dazed kind of expression as though he could not remember the words he wanted, and added with an effort — "your coat and things."

He rushed up the stairs and returned with Nessa's hat and jacket. He helped her into them, and then they set off together for the wood. Nessa stretched out her hand for his, and they went hand in hand the whole way, but something in Murtagh's manner prevented a word from being spoken.

It was almost dark when they reached the spot where Royal lay. They found Winnie still lying beside him, but she was awake now and seemed calmer. She sat up when she saw them; Nessa knelt down beside her and kissed her; and though her tears began to flow again they were quieter and more natural.

"You must come home now, dear," said Nessa after a little time, gently laying her cheek against the troubled face that rested upon her shoulder, and almost unconsciously tightening the clasp of her arms as she thought of the new trouble waiting at home.

Murtagh had stood watching them in silence, and now he only said: "We will cover him with branches." He picked a branch of fir as he spoke and gently laid it upon Royal's body. But there was in his tone such resolute putting on one side of his own grief, such perfect patient tenderness for Winnie, that Nessa could contain her tears no longer, and she fairly sobbed.

She recovered herself immediately, and her tears served to compose Winnie, who kissed her and got up and helped Murtagh to put the covering upon Royal. The last branch was soon laid upon his head, and then Winnie went slowly away with Nessa. But Murtagh stayed behind and plunged again into the wood, where flinging himself upon the ground, he gave way to all his grief. It was not only grief for Frankie which brought those short fierce sobs and then the long bursts of tears — tears that ran down unheeded into the ground on which he lay. It was everything altogether that made the child so supremely miserable.

How long he lay there he did not know, but night had come when at last sick and exhausted he sat up and leaned against a tree.

It was time to be going home, but he could not face the school-room full of children. He would sleep there, he thought; and he was lying down again at the foot of the tree, when it occurred to him that the hut would be a better place. So he got up, and with some difficulty, because of the darkness, he crossed the river and groped his way to where the little island path made an opening in the thick brushwood. He drew himself up the bank and advanced slowly, stretching out his hands to feel for the door. He groped about unable, of course, to find it, till presently his foot struck against something, a covered fire apparently, for a shower of sparks flew upwards. He jumped to one side, and a bright blaze flaming out displayed to his astounded eyes the scattered rubbish, which was all that remained of their beloved hut. The stones had been taken away, but the door and broken pieces of the roof lay there upon the ground.

So utterly astonished was he that at first he could scarcely believe his eyes. Then he remembered the sounds which had echoed through the woods in the earlier part of the day, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling he exclaimed aloud:

"The coward! he has taken advantage of——"

"Ay, and it isn't only your little play-place he's turned you out of," said a familiar voice behind him in the bushes, "but my father and mother's to be turned out of the place they've held backwards and forwards this hundred years, because they can't pay the rent since it's riz upon them last Michaelmas."

Murtagh started and turned round to see Pat O'Toole standing in the full blaze of the firelight.

"Oh, Pat, Pat!" he cried, springing towards him, "you've come back at last."

"I couldn't stop away at all," he replied. "I was up in the mountains, and one and another of the boys gave me food, but I used to come down o' nights, an' one night my mother was out fetching the goat, and the tears were running down as she walked along, and so I couldn't help it at all, but I just up and told her I was there. And look here, Mr. Murtagh," he continued, dropping his voice and coming closer, "the boys say he isn't a bit o' good, and now he's riz the rents there's the Dalys'll have to go out, an' the Cannons; and there's many 'll die o' distress with the winter coming on, and the bad potatoes an' all; an' I 've been watchin' for you because I thought ye 'd help me. And look here, Mr. Murtagh, if ye 'll get me a gun some way I 'll shoot him, and ha' done with it."

Pat's voice sank into a fierce hoarse whisper as he ended, and his face was bent down close to Murtagh's. Murtagh did not answer at once; he could hardly believe that he was not dreaming, and Pat continued: "It 's a benefactor you 'll be to the country. There 's many and many a one 'll bless you far an' wide. There's Jim Cannon, brother to Cannon down beyant there, has his wife and children in the Union, and he 's wanderin' about, daren't come home and do a bit o' decent work because Plunkett 's informed against him for a Fenian.

"And there 's Mike Coyle and his wife and children had to turn out and shift for themselves, because he wouldn't let the old man keep them with him at home in his own place. And there 's my mother and father turned out of a place we 've had from one to another this hundred year; and Johnny Worsted taken from his work, and his old father and mother dependin' upon him, and sent to prison for nothing in the world but knocking over a couple o' little hares. And look now, Mr. Murtagh," he added, dropping his voice again to a cautious whisper, "if he was killed out o' the way it 'd all come right, and I told the boys how we were bound together in a tribe like, and you 'd never fail us in a pinch. There 's many and many a heart 'll be made glad through the country. Isn 't he oppressin' every one of us, and changin' all the old ways that was good enough for them as was better than him! And look at yerselves; isn 't it just the same way with yez? Isn 't he tyrannizin' over yez, and doesn't mind a word anybody spakes to him, but only havin' everything his own way? He doesn't care for any one's feelin's! Just look at the way he massacrated Miss Winnie's beautiful dog this mornin', and she nearly cried her heart out over it. But he don't care, he 'd do it again to-morrow; and only took advantage of ye bein' thinkin' o' that, to come and pull down your hut that was built before ever he came here."

Murtagh listened now without attempting to interrupt. He had hated Mr. Plunkett before, but nothing had ever equaled the feelings with which he regarded him to-day. The shooting of Royal, their beautiful Royal, who was almost like another brother to them, was too cruel. And then when the news of Frankie's death had come and they were absorbed by their double misery, to take advantage of that to pull down their hut! There was something so revolting in such conduct that Murtagh could only think of the man with disgust as well as hate.

Pat's words stirred up all the fierce passion of last night, and the feelings with which he had heard Nessa's story surged up again in his heart. As he listened the blood went coursing swiftly through his veins. Was not this a way to end it all? All the country round was suffering as they were. The people looked to him to help them; would not this be doing something indeed for freedom! He never in the least realized what it was; how could he, a child of eleven? But it presented itself vaguely to him as a grand and terrible action. Something in him spoke loudly against Pat's reasoning, but so thoroughly was his whole nature warped by the excitement of the last month that he mistook his true instinct for cowardice, asking himself if John of Procida would have hesitated so.

And while his decision was hanging thus in the balance, Pat brought before him the picture of Winnie's grief and Mr. Plunkett's indifference. The remembrance flashed through his mind of Hickey's words in the morning — "It would serve old Plunkett right to be shot with the very same gun," and with a sudden gust of passion he decided.

"Yes," he said, "I'll do it! you shall have the very gun he shot Royal with."

"I knew ye'd help us!" replied Pat exultingly "I told the boys you wouldn't fail us; ye have too much o' the real old spirit in ye."

It was done; he had given his promise; but if he had only hesitated one minute longer all might have been different. Pat had only just answered when a sound of scrambling on the other bank made Murtagh exclaim in a hurried whisper, "Hide!" and there was barely time for Pat to conceal himself in the bushes before Bobbo appeared followed by Nessa.

Poor little Nessa looked very white and tired, and a faint struggle to smile died away in the attempt.

"I was nervous," she said; "I could not go to bed while you were out, so Bobbo came with me. He thought you would be here. Will you not come in now?"

"Yes," said Murtagh, "I 'll come, you go on first."

Nessa looked at him in some surprise. She had expected to find him prostrated with grief in some out-of-the-way corner, but here he was standing up by a blazing fire, his cheeks flushed, and his eyes bright with excitement. He really was incomprehensible.

"Our hut gone!" exclaimed Bobbo in dismay, standing still and surveying the ruins. "He can't have been so mean—! To take it to-day!" And with the remembrance of all the day's troubles the tears came into his eyes.

"Yes," said Murtagh. Then in a hurried loud voice he continued: "Never mind; let us go home. Get on the stones and help Nessa down."

His manner half-frightened Nessa; she wondered whether he were ill. She followed Bobbo, however, and Pat putting his head out from his place of concealment whispered to Murtagh:

"To-morrow night, here."

"All right, here!" Murtagh replied, and he hastened after the others.

Nessa put her hand through his arm as they walked along. Murtagh knew that she meant it partly as a caress, and he almost wished she would not. He was in no mood for caresses. They spoke little. Murtagh asked what time it was, and was told it must be eleven now. They had waited till ten, Nessa said, before they started to look for him.

As they were nearing home Murtagh roused himself with an effort from his thoughts.

"Poor Nessa!" he said; "you must be nearly dead tramping about like this. Why did you come for me?—I 'd have done very well out there."

"I couldn't have you out there. I did not know where you were; I was frightened." And there was a little tremble in Nessa's voice that melted away a good deal of Murtagh's excitement.

In the school-room he found a little table prepared for supper.

"You have eaten nothing all day," said Nessa, and she insisted upon his sitting down and trying to eat while she made some tea from a kettle that stood boiling on the hob.

To please her he tried to eat, and under the influence of her gentle ways and little tender cares he grew quieter and quieter. At last he asked hesitatingly "if she had told Winnie yet?"

"Yes," she replied. "It was no use to keep it for the poor child to hear in the morning. When she was in bed I told her."

Murtagh sat looking into the fire for a few minutes with tears glistening in his eyes, and then he asked:

"What did she—?"

"Poor little thing!—she could not believe it at first, and then, then it was very sad. She seemed to feel so much about Frankie having given her Royal; it made it worse for her. She has cried herself to sleep again now. I went in to look at her before we came out."

Nessa spoke a little hesitatingly, saddened by the recollection of Winnie's grief, and not knowing what effect her words would have upon Murtagh But she was relieved to see tears flowing over his cheeks, they were more natural than his previous state of excitement

"I think I'll go to bed," he said in a choked voice, getting up to say good night.

"Good night, dear!" and she held him tight in her arms for a moment as she kissed him.

Her tenderness brought back all the soft natural grief for his cousin, and when he was in bed he gave not a thought to Pat; but, like Winnie, cried himself to sleep with his mind full of thoughts of Frankie's dear loving ways.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

NEXT morning poor Royal was buried. Hickey asked the children where they would like his grave to be dug, and Winnie chose the point of the island.

With many tears he was taken across the river and laid in his last resting-place. The sobs that escaped from Winnie as the earth was thrown in upon him shook Murtagh's heart and stirred up again his bitter indignation against Mr. Plunkett, but he stood silent beside her till the last shovelful of earth was patted down into its place. Good-natured Hickey had begged a rose-tree from Bland, which he planted for them at the head of the grave; then he took his tools and trudged away, telling them not to fret. Bobbo called Rosie to see the desolation of the hut, and Winnie and Murtagh were left standing by the grave alone.

"Don't stay here, Win," said Murtagh, putting his arm round her neck. "It will make you so dreadfully miserable, as it did yesterday. Come away into the wood, and let us be together. And look here, Win," he added, the indignation breaking out at last. "There's one thing, you'll be well paid out. He's going to get what he deserves at last."

"That won't do any good," returned Winnie disconsolately. "But I hope he will," she added with sudden anger. "It will serve him right. Oh, Murtagh, how could any one be so cowardly and so cruel to shoot at him when he was in the water like that?—so close to him he couldn't possibly miss. And then—then Royal looked as if he thought I 'd sent him in on purpose, and he couldn't understand when I told him we didn't; and—and Frankie said he knew I 'd never let any one hurt him; and now Frankie 's dead, and I can't tell him about it either; and oh, Myrrh, doesn't it seem as if everybody was dying?" The end of Winnie's sentence was almost lost in tears.

The two children had been moving away while she spoke with their arms round each other's necks, and now they wandered into the wood and spent the rest of the morning walking up and down together, their conversation a confused medley of grief, anger, and sad, loving recollections of the doings of their two dead.

Towards the end anger predominated. Murtagh repeated to Winnie all that Pat had told him of the sufferings of the people about. He told her, too, that Pat was in hiding at home; that he was going to be revenged on Mr. Plunkett, and that he (Murtagh) was going to help him. He did not tell her exactly what he was going to do, something within him prevented him from speaking of that. Winnie listened eagerly.

"I do hope he will succeed," she said; and just fancy, Myrrh, if he does set all the people free, he will be just like John of Procida that Nessa was telling us about."

And for the moment Murtagh wished that he were himself the one who was to shoot Mr. Plunkett.

In the afternoon Nessa went to Ballyboden to buy what was necessary for the children's mourning, and Rosie eagerly accepted her invitation to go too, and help her in the choice. They took Ellie with them in the carriage, and the other three being left alone spent a half-sad, half-bitter afternoon wandering idly about together.

Theresa Curran, coming up to the Castle on a mes sage, met them in the avenue, and curtsying deeply told them with some shyness that "they down at the village was all very glad to think it was Mr. Murtagh now would be master over them some day."

Murtagh did not understand what she meant, and when she explained that "sure, after the master, it 'll belong to you and yours now," he exclaimed in angry surprise:

"You mean that you 're glad! Aren't you ashamed to be so cruel and unkind?"

Theresa saw that she had made a mistake, and replied in some confusion: "'Deed, an' we 're all very sorry for him, poor little gentleman, but we 'll be very glad to have you reign over us, Mr. Murtagh dear. There 'll be a stop put then, maybe, to some o' the doings goes on now. Every one hunted out o' their homes, and no more account made of it than if they was wild animals."

Theresa's complaint was bitter enough, seeing that her mother was one of the people who were to be "hunted out o' their homes;" but it was only Irish wit that led her to make it at that moment. It seemed to her the readiest means of diverting Murtagh's attention from her piece of gaucherie, and she was not mistaken. Murtagh inquired at once who else was being turned out, and nearly an hour was spent in listening to Theresa giving the same account as Pat had given of the village discontent.

"There!" said Murtagh as she passed on; "they all say just the same thing."

"And I don't wonder," replied Bobbo; "when he could do what he did yesterday he could do anything. Why if it wasn't for him being so unjust poor Royal would be safe away with you, instead of —"

"I don't think he has ever done anything but make people unhappy all his life!" said Winnie, her tears overflowing again as she spoke. "Even poor little Frankie, he made him miserable the last time he was here, and if it hadn't been for him we might have been there at least to say good-by."

Still an hour afterwards, when Winnie and Bobbo feeling that they must do something, went to see the cows milked, and Murtagh was left alone, misgivings, which took the form of a natural shrinking from what he was going to do, assailed his mind. He tried to combat his doubts. This was a right and a great thing to do. It was a just retribution that Mr. Plunkett should be shot with the very gun he had used against Royal. All the people would be able to spend this winter in their homes. If Frankie could know things he would be glad.

Instinctive right was strong enough within him, however, to make it impossible for him to feel quite clear, and it was with a sense of relief that he saw the carriage coming up the avenue, and ran to the hall door to meet it.

There were a great many parcels to be taken out, and before they were all disposed of Winnie and Bobbo made their appearance.

"Oh, Winnie!" cried Rosie, "Nessa has chosen such pretty hats for us! Ellie is to have a little round one, but we are to have felts turned up at one side, with a long black feather going right down over our hair."

Winnie looked at her in astonishment. "I do believe," she began contemptuously; but whatever she had been going to say was apparently too bitter, for she broke off suddenly and turned away while her eyes filled with tears.

Rosie reddened so painfully that Nessa felt quite sorry for her, and giving her some parcels asked her to take them to her bed-room; Rosie escaped up-stairs, and Nessa soon followed to take off her things.

Then came tea, and Nessa came to the school-room to pour it out. She did not often honor the tea-table with her presence, but her coming was always a treat, and to-day she seemed only to think of what she could do to please the children. At another time Murtagh would have appreciated her gentle kindness, but now the time for him to perform his promise to Pat was drawing so near, that he was too much excited to be able to feel anything save the strain of trying to be quiet and to appear unconcerned.

He had decided yesterday evening on leaving the island that the time to possess himself of the gun would be while Mr. Plunkett was down at supper. Supper at the Red House was a kind of tea-dinner, at seven o'clock, and as that hour approached all doubts were thrown aside, and his heart beat high in anticipation. He could not sit still through the whole of tea-time, but after drinking a cup of milk and shaking his head at all offers of food he presently pushed back his chair and went away.

It was already dusk, so he went out into the park, and hovered about near the Red House till the ringing of the supper-bell announced that his time had come. Then it was the work of a minute to climb on the roof of the dairy, and from thence into Mr. Plunkett's dressing-room, the window of which was shutterless. The room was, of course, quite dark, but Murtagh had matches in his pocket, and with trembling fingers lit the candle. He knew the gun was kept in a cupboard in the corner among walking-sticks and fishing-tackle. He found it in its usual place, found also the cartridges belonging to it, possessed himself of both, extinguished the light, and noiselessly let himself down again on to the dairy roof. In another minute he was safe outside the garden, hurrying away towards the island.

It was the first time in his life that he had held a gun in his hands, and the touch of the steel barrel made him shudder. He was not quite free from doubt either as to whether it would not go off, but he was burning with excitement; and soon he stood amongst the ruins of the hut where, by the light of a more cautious fire than the one he had kicked into flames the night before, Pat sat waiting for him.

"There," he cried, putting the gun into Pat's hands. "Now when are you going to do it?"

'To-morrow evening 'll be my chance. He 's going to dine up at the Castle to-morrow, and on his way home is when I 'm to do it," replied Pat. "Then I 'm to throw the gun down beside him and go straight away off again, and being his own gun there's no one will be suspected."

But there seemed something treacherous to Murtagh in the idea of killing Mr. Plunkett in the dark, on his way home from dinner at the Castle.

"Oh no, Pat," he exclaimed, "I don't like that. Do it out in the field in the morning, and let him know what it's for. Couldn't you show me how to do it?"

"Whisht, sir; ye don't know anything about it," replied Pat, grasping the gun. "Leave it to me and I'll settle it right enough."

"Yes, but, Pat, you mustn't do it that cowardly way," persisted Murtagh.

"Now, Mr. Murtagh, ye're talking foolish," said Pat, who seemed to have grown years older in his short absence. "Whatever way we do it mustn't we do it sure an' certain? and if it's me's to do it mustn't I do it my own way? What good would it do ye for the polis to take me? Leave it to me and he'll know what it's for sure enough. Ye don't want to be goin' back off your word, do ye?"

"No, indeed, I don't!" cried Murtagh with vivid recollection of Winnie's grief and Theresa's stories.

"They said I'd never be able to do it right," pursued Pat; "but gettin' a gun was the only thing that bothered me; now my mother'll stop where she is and die in the old home; and it isn't only her — there's many'll say a prayer for ye for this evening's work, Mr. Murtagh. They say what he wants is to turn us all out and get foreigners in bit by bit. It's an Englishman he's put into Dolan's farm. But if we mayn't live at home in our own place where is it we'll live at all? We're made no more account of than if we was rats and mice."

Then followed detail after detail that only served to inflame Murtagh's heated brain the more. Neither of the boys really knew anything of what he was talking about. They only heard that people had to pay more than they had ever paid before for their homes, and that in some cases they were turned out of them altogether. They did not hear that where rents had been raised it was in consequence of expensive and necessary improvements; where tenants had been turned out it was always for a solid reason. Rigorous justice had been dealt to all. But the people did not like such ways, and Pat repeated to Murtagh the grumblings of the worst and most discontented among them.

Murtagh could have sat there all night listening to his stories, but it would not do for him to attract attention by being late again this evening; so after a time he bade Pat good night and hurried homewards. In his present state of excitement he could not venture into the schoolroom, but sending Peggy in to say that he had gone to bed he went straight to his own room.

◆

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HE tossed and tumbled all night long, wakening Bobbo sometimes, and frightening him by the wild things he called out in his sleep, and next morning when he woke he was in such a state of nervous exaltation as made even Bobbo's companionship almost too painful to be borne. Only now did he fully realize that his share in this enterprise was done, and the greatness of the catastrophe he was helping to bring about seemed to begin to dawn upon him as the time for its fulfillment approached. His heart thumped against his side; his lips and hands were hot and dry. How was he to spend his day in the companionship of the others without betraying himself?

He knew that he could not keep away from them all day without causing remark and perhaps search; so he tried to force himself to feel calmer, and when the breakfast-bell summoned him to the dining-room he went in and took his usual seat at the table.

But so startling was his appearance that Nessa exclaimed anxiously: "Murtagh dear, you are ill!"

His uncle looked up, and was shocked too at the face that his eyes rested upon.

"Why, my boy," he said kindly, "what is the matter with you? Do you feel pain anywhere?"

"I am quite well, thank you," said Murtagh. He had felt as if he could not make his lips frame the short sentence, but the words came out in a clear, loud tone that astonished him. His uncle continued to look anxiously at him. Nessa said no more, but put a cup of tea beside his plate, laying her hand for one instant on his head as she passed back to her own seat. Her touch thrilled through him in a way that was almost pain. He drank some of the tea, and then his heart began to beat less rapidly; so that when his uncle asked him if he had slept well he was able to answer more naturally: "Yes, thank you."

"Awfully queerly!" said Bobbo; "you were shouting out all sorts of things all the time!"

His uncle made no remark, and breakfast proceeded in silence. But when it was over Mr. Blair called Nessa back as she was leaving the room and told her that she had better send for the doctor and let him see Murtagh.

"It can do no harm, at all events," he said, "and the child looks ill."

Breakfast had done Murtagh good, but he was in a state of feverish unrest. He made an effort to control himself, and talked loud, and tried to "chaff" the children when they hazarded surmises as to what might be the matter with him; but he was glad at last to take refuge in saying that he did not feel very well, and throwing himself upon the school-room sofa he lay for the rest of that miserable morning with his eyes fixed upon its brown moreen back.

Every distant banging of a door, every step in the passage, every sudden raising of voices, caused his heart almost to stand still with expectation, for in his excitement yesterday evening he had not quite clearly understood whether Pat did or did not intend to change the plan of action he had described. All he knew was that he had done his share, he had given the gun, and now at any moment Mr. Plunkett might be killed with it.

He did not shrink, but as the time approached his mind had become so filled with the horror of the deed that he felt not one grain of the exultation he had expected. Still he did *not* shrink. If any one had offered to undo for him all that he had done he would not have accepted the offer, for he clung to his belief that this was a great action. But though he would not have gone back, there came once or twice underneath all a pricking doubt which for the moment turned his state of expectation into agony.

Could it be that he was all wrong? Yesterday evening Pat had crushed the dawning of this thought by the assertion that it was a doubt only worthy of a child, and by the tales of injustice with which he had so adroitly proceeded to fill Murtagh's mind. But his description of the way the gun was to be used was altogether different from anything Murtagh had conceived, and it was impossible quite to shake off the conviction that it must be cowardly to shoot at a man in the dark when he suspects no danger.

Twice during the morning this conviction grew so strong as almost to make the whole truth flash upon Murtagh, but he rejected it. It was impossible. Pat's way of doing it might be cowardly, but the deed itself must be great, and as one after another of Pat's and Theresa's stories came back into his mind he felt persuaded again that he was right.

The morning passed away; the terrible news that Murtagh lay expecting did not come; and it was just luncheon time when Rosie, returning from a message to Nessa's room, remarked that Mr. Plunkett had been looking over papers in the study all day, and that some lunch had just gone up for him on Uncle Blair's tray. Then it had not happened yet, and it could not happen for some time to come. Murtagh scarcely knew if he were relieved to hear it, but the strain of momentary expectation was gone, and he began to feel tolerably sure now that Pat intended to keep to the plan he had described.

The doctor came after lunch, but he could make nothing of Murtagh's state, and went away saying that he would call again to-morrow.

As Mr. Blair had seemed anxious, Nessa went to the study to tell him what the doctor had said, and after a time, Murtagh, who had remained standing by the drawing-room window, heard through the open door the sound of Mr. Plunkett's voice and Mr. Blair's as they advanced with her towards the hall door. They were not thinking of him apparently, for they were talking of some business matter. Mr. Plunkett went out, and Mr. Blair called after him: "Seven o'clock dinner, remember, Plunkett."

Yes, and after that seven o'clock dinner! As Murtagh stood watching Mr. Plunkett walk briskly away over the grass all his horror of the way Pat had chosen for the execution of his plan came back upon him in full force. Surely, surely, it was treacherous to kill a man in the dark, when he was on his way home from your very own house. He stood immovable, his eyes fixed upon Mr. Plunkett, his head feeling as though it were really turning with conflicting thoughts, till Mr. Plunkett disappeared behind some distant bushes. Then some words of his uncle's fell upon his ears. He was talking to Nessa in the hall.

"Yes, all things considered," he was saying, "it is strange, isn't it, little one, that that man should be risking his life every day for Murtagh's benefit?"

Murtagh could hardly believe his senses. What was his uncle talking about?

Nessa apparently did not understand either.

"How do you mean for Murtagh?" she asked.

"I thought I had told you how he constantly receives threatening letters in consequence of the improvements he is making in the estate. Many of these improvements will bear no fruit till long after my time, and now that poor little Frankie is gone Murtagh is the person who will profit by them. I remarked that to Plunkett to-day, when he was talking to me about this ejectment business, and I asked him why he went on with it. He said, 'It is my duty, sir.'" Mr. Blair had spoken slowly, and he ended with a little sigh.

"But surely, Uncle Blair," asked Nessa, as Mr. Blair moved away, "they could never really shoot him?"

"I believe," replied Mr. Blair, "that if it were not well known that he always carries a loaded pistol he would be shot at to-morrow. Now the risk is too great, for they know that if they miss him he is not likely to miss them. His perfect fearlessness is greatly in his favor.

"Oh dear, what a terrible, dreadful, place!" sighed Nessa, as her uncle left her standing in the hall. She hated to hear of these things; they made her feel as though she would like just to lock herself up in her bedroom and stay there all the rest of her natural life.

On his side of the drawing-room door Murtagh stood horror-stricken at the revelation that Mr. Plunkett was deliberately risking his life for his benefit, at the time that he was consenting to a plot to kill Mr. Plunkett. He understood only in the vaguest manner how it came about that it was for his benefit; still his uncle's words were not to be mistaken, and the mere fact that Mr. Plunkett knew the danger and braved it deliberately, was in itself enough to arouse in that impulsive little heart something akin to sympathy. Every generous feeling in him was set at war with what Pat was going to do, but still he felt with an accuteness of suffering beyond his years that the cause of the people was just the same. If it had been right before that Mr. Plunkett should die, it was right now. What should he do? It had become odious in him to have helped Pat, but Pat was just as right as ever, and in passionate defence of him he entered the hall, exclaiming:

"Nessa, you and Uncle Blair don't know how he does things. You don't know how he turns the people out of their houses, and sends them to prison for nothing, and sees them starving in the winter-time and doesn't care. No wonder they hate him. No wonder they want to kill him! Every one says if Uncle Blair would go about himself things would be very different. He may make money, but oh! I wish it could never be for me. I would rather starve than have that money that's robbed from them."

"He is not robbing them," exclaimed Nessa, opening her great gray eyes indignantly; "and even if he were it's too dreadful hating like that and watching to kill people. I'd rather be oppressed all my life than be guilty of a cowardly murder."

"It's only what the Sicilians did," answered Murtagh. "It's not right that a tyrant should go on doing what he pleases."

"It's not what the Sicilians did," returned Nessa; "they fought a brave hand-to-hand struggle; they did not secretly murder a man who was going fearlessly about amongst them; and what they did do they did only after having tried every other means in their power. Besides, they fought against real tyranny, and Mr. Plunkett is not tyrannizing over these people; I know he is not, Murtagh. Uncle Blair has told me about it lots of times. He's trying all he can to make things better for the people, only they are so unreasonable; they expect to have everything done for them, and they don't want to give anything in exchange. It is quite fair when a lot of expensive improvements have been made that the rent should be raised; and then when people are drunken and worthless and won't take care of their land of course they *have* to be turned out. Mr. Plunkett may be disagreeable," she added, "but I don't see why they need hate him for that. We hate people, I suppose, when they are wicked; but he isn't wicked; they are wicked when they can think for one minute of such mean, cowardly revenge."

"You don't know, Nessa. He is wicked. He must be wicked. You 'll drive me perfectly mad if you talk like that. I believe everything 's all wrong together and nothing ever can be right."

And with this confused utterance of the despair that was fast possessing him Murtagh would have rushed away out of doors, but Nessa caught him in her arms, and thinking that her indignation had hurt him, exclaimed penitently:

"Murtagh dear, I didn't mean you. Of course I never meant that for one minute. I know very well that whatever else you are you could never be cruel and cowardly."

He did not speak; he had no right to her faith, no right to her love. He disengaged himself as quickly as he could and rushed away, he didn't care where — anywhere, anywhere to escape from the thoughts that came hurrying upon him now. But he made one last effort still to combat them. Nessa did not know, Mr. Blair did not know all that went on. They only heard Mr. Plunkett's account; he had heard the people's side. He called to mind story after story to fortify himself in his refusal to believe Nessa; but more than ever did he hate the manner in which Pat had decided to do the deed.

If only he had had the slightest idea where Pat was to be found he would have gone to him, and insisted that it should be done openly. But he had not. He only knew that he was not to be on the island. They had decided that it was an unsafe place to stay because of the children. Mrs. O'Toole might know. Murtagh went to her, but she declared that she knew nothing about Pat's hiding-place; and whether she knew or not no power of Murtagh's could draw the information from her. In despair he returned to the park. There was nothing to be done but to let things take their course. After all wasn't Pat perhaps right; since he was to do it hadn't he a right to choose his own way? Wasn't it weak to want to stop it now?

Scarcely knowing where he went Murtagh nevertheless kept near the Red House, declaring to himself that things must now take their course, but at the same time feeling as though he in some measure protected Mr. Plunkett by keeping close to him.

At last he threw himself upon the ground under a hedge, and he had not been there many minutes when steps and voices on the other side roused him from his miserable struggle.

He sat up, discovered that he was sitting under the hedge of Mr. Plunkett's back garden, and as he began to take note of external things he became aware that Mr. Plunkett was walking along the path on the other side of the hedge carrying his little daughter in his arms. There were gaps in the thickness of the hedge, and Murtagh could see the pair quite distinctly. The child's head rested lovingly upon her father's shoulder, the golden hair scattered a little over his sleeve. One arm was 'round his neck, and the delicate little face was illumined by that look of perfect contentment which is almost more beautiful than a smile.

"How nice it is that you are so strong, Fardie," she said caressingly as they passed close by Murtagh.

"Are you comfortable, dear?" asked Mr. Plunkett.

"Yes, very," she replied with a little sigh of pleasure.

They took one turn in silence down the path and back again. Then little Marion spoke again, but this time there was a troubled sound in her voice.

"Don't be late to-night, father, will you?"

"Not very, my pet," replied Mr. Plunkett, "but you must be sound asleep long before I come."

"I 'll shut up my eyes and try, Fardie, but I can't go to sleep when you 're out because——" And here the little voice trembled and stopped short.

"Because what, dear?" said Mr. Plunkett, bending his head a little so that his cheek touched her forehead.

"Because I think such dreadful things when I 'm in the dark, and I get so dreadfully, dreadfully frightened, Fardie, lest those wicked men might kill you!"

The last words came out in a low tone, as though she feared that uttering them might make what she dreaded more probable, and putting her other arm up round her father's neck she clung to him tightly.

"Who let you hear of such things?" exclaimed Mr Plunkett in the stern voice that Murtagh knew well.

"Mother often cries when you 're out," said Marion; "and she says perhaps you 'll be brought in dead! But, Fardie, you mustn't, because I *couldn't* bear it!"

Mr. Plunkett did not speak immediately; then he said:

"My little daughter, you mustn't mind everything you hear people say, but if such a thing ever did happen you will be my own brave child, won't you?—and you will like to think afterwards that your father died at his work!"

"No, no, Fardie, I couldn't be brave then!" cried Marion. "I couldn't stay alive with only mother! You won't let them do it? Promise, father!"

At that moment "mother's" voice made itself heard, calling: "Marion, Marion, come in! How could you keep her out so late, James?"

"No, no, my pet; they shan't do it if I can help it!" replied Mr. Plunkett, kissing her and hastily setting her down. "Now put all such ideas out of your head, and run in to your mother; she 's calling you."

The child went slowly away and Mr. Plunkett looking after her said sadly:

"My poor little one, I suppose it will come upon you some day soon; and yet, God knows, I am doing the best I can for them!"

He spoke to himself, but the words were loud enough to reach Murtagh's ears, and they told him more than years of explanations could have done.

For the moment he felt as if he could almost have loved Mr. Plunkett. He dashed out of the ditch and away across the park. Find Pat he must and would. He saw it all in its true light now! How could he have helped in such a fiendish plan?

It was easier to determine to find Pat than to find him. Murtagh went back again to Mrs. O'Toole, but she either could not or would not help him. In the woods by the island, on every island in their part of the river, in the shrubberies, in every clump of trees that dotted the park, he searched but searched in vain; and while he looked it grew dark.

But though he hurried from place to place he was comparatively calm now. He had quite made up his mind what to do, and his energy was the energy of resolution. Pat evidently intended to keep to the late hour he had named, and before any mischief could be done he must come into the park and station himself between the Castle and the Red House. There Murtagh was almost sure that he could not miss him, and since it seemed impossible to find him now there was nothing to be done but to wait. He was not going to betray Pat by warning Mr. Plunkett if he could help it, and having thoroughly searched the park he watched Mr. Plunkett without any fear as he crossed it on his way to dinner.

Then he entered the house, and fetching himself a cup of milk and some bread from the servants' hall he sat quietly enough upon the door-step while he ate it. Mr. Plunkett would not return home till ten o'clock. Murtagh knew that he always took his leave when the clock struck that hour, so there was a long anxious time to wait before Pat was likely to be found, and as Murtagh sat upon the step he planned with an almost curious calmness all that must come after.

Pat must be helped somehow. The only way would be, Murtagh thought, to tell his uncle all. First he thought of going to Nessa, but a more manly instinct made him decide that he would go straight to his uncle. Then he hoped things would be put properly right for Pat, and it was with a lighter heart than he had had for a long time that he got up to continue his search.

But the night was pitch dark, and towards half-past nine he was still unsuccessful. He was keeping careful watch upon the time, and the suspense now grew painfully intense, for he knew that if he had not discovered Pat when the stable clock rung out a quarter to ten, there would be nothing for it but to warn Mr. Plunkett. Was Pat not coming at all? and if not, where and how should he ever find him?

At last he began to call gently, "Pat, Pat!" and after a minute a cautious, "Whisht, sir!" from some bushes on his right told him that Pat was there.

He bounded forward. "I began to think that I should never find you!" he exclaimed. "Here, give me the gun! Oh, Pat, to think how awfully near we were doing it!"

But Pat started back, holding the gun tightly, and asked in a tone different from any he had ever used to Murtagh before, "What is it you 're meaning?"

"We were dreadfully wicked, really; he 's not half so bad as we thought, and it would have been just a cowardly murder," said Murtagh, his voice conveying the horror that he felt.

"I don't care what it is," said Pat. "I 'm going to do it this night."

"You shan't touch him," replied Murtagh. "You don't understand. He isn't half so bad as we thought. This isn't the way; give me the gun."

"Look here, Mr. Murtagh, I don't want to hurt ye," replied Pat in a fierce whisper, "but if ye offer to touch that gun I 'll have to give ye a knock that 'll keep you quiet till it 's all over."

"Are you mad, Pat? I tell you we were all wrong." And Murtagh stretched out his hand for the gun.

"Right or wrong, it 's all one to me. I won't stir out o' this till he 's as dead as a door-nail."

"You shan't touch him with that gun; I got it, and I 'll have it back," replied Murtagh. As he spoke he seized the gun, and half-succeeded in wrenching it from Pat's grasp. Pat struck out at him a blow that made him reel back and loose his hold for a moment, but he sprang forward and seized the gun again. Pat tried to wrench it from him; Murtagh hung on with all his strength; the gun went off in the struggle, and the loud report rang through the park. Almost instantaneously there was a second report. Something whizzed through the bushes, and before Murtagh had time to realize what had happened Pat had fled and he was standing alone with the gun in his hands, a curious stiff sensation numbing his left arm. He felt half-stunned, and all he could think at first was that Pat was gone, and that something strange had happened. He stood there for a few seconds; then he sprang out of the bushes and hurried towards the house.

The hall was full of light and commotion. The children were out upon the steps, the servants had come from the kitchen, Nessa and Mr. Blair stood by Mr. Plunkett, who in a perfectly calm voice was desiring Brown to bring him a lantern.

"I heard no sound after I fired," he added, turning to Mr. Blair, "but if any one is wounded we must get a doctor for him, and if—if it should be worse—"

"I trust it is not, I trust it is not," interrupted Mr. Blair, "but if it should be so, Plunkett, remember we were fully agreed beforehand that what you have done was the right thing to do."

"It is all right," cried Murtagh, "you haven't hurt him, and here's your gun; you're quite safe now."

His arm was hurting, and his head swam, so that he staggered and almost fell as he held out the gun to Mr. Plunkett.

"And he never fired at you at all; it was when I was trying to get the gun from him that it went off. But oh, do be *kinder* to the people. They don't know anything about just; and he doesn't understand now; they *can't* understand."

And the tension of that awful day over at last, the excitement died suddenly out of Murtagh's face, and Mr. Plunkett had just time to catch him in his arms as he fell fainting to the floor.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HE recovered consciousness to find himself on the drawing-room sofa, with Nessa and Mrs. Donegan anxiously applying restoratives, while Mr. Blair and the children stood round. The moment the wound in his arm had been perceived, Mr. Plunkett had himself saddled a horse and gone to fetch a doctor.

"Go away, please, all of you," said Murtagh, as soon as he could speak. "I want to speak to Uncle Blair. Nessa may stay."

Mrs. Donegan and the children looked reluctant, but Mr. Blair turned them all out except Winnie. She was sitting curled up on a footstool by the head of the sofa, and she did not stir.

"Murtagh and me's the same," she said. "I know what he's going to say." And as Murtagh put out his hand to keep her, Uncle Blair shut the door.

"Please promise first," said Murtagh, "that you won't tell anybody else."

"If it's about the man who made this attempt to night, Murtagh, I'm afraid I can't promise," replied Mr. Blair, reluctant to refuse, but with a remembrance of Mr. Plunkett's energy in his mind. "He must be prosecuted; you yourself will, I fear, be obliged to answer questions in a court of justice."

"But you *must* promise," said Murtagh, a feverish flush spreading over his cheek. "Make him promise, Nessa. I know I have no right, but it's the only way. It can't possibly be put right if he doesn't."

"Do promise him," said Nessa, looking entreatingly at her uncle, and then glancing anxiously at Murtagh. "Surely you can manage somehow." And most unconstitutionally Mr. Blair did manage.

"It was more my fault than his, because he couldn't have done it if I hadn't got him the gun yesterday," began Murtagh. But he suddenly closed his eyes, unable to proceed. Nessa put a spoonful of brandy between his lips and he revived a little.

"Don't say anything more, my boy," said his uncle, astonishment at Murtagh's statement entirely swallowed up in anxiety; "I understand you don't want him punished."

"I can't tell you now," continued Murtagh, "I feel so funny; but you must help him soon, or he 'll do it again. He doesn't understand. He 's hiding now. His mother — I — I can't remember; Winnie 'll know."

He looked anxiously at Winnie, and his eyes closed again, but he was not unconscious; and Nessa, while she attended to him, said almost impatiently:

"Tell us what it is, Winnie. This excitement is very bad for him." All the Irishmen in Christendom seemed to her at that moment of no importance compared to the chances of fever setting in with this wounded arm.

"I don't quite know," said Winnie, taking hold of Murtagh's hand and looking up at her uncle; "but I think what he means is he wants you to help Pat O'Toole. He 's been in hiding ever since the fire, you know, and I suppose ——" Here Winnie hesitated a little. "I suppose he has tried to do this, and that 's why Murtagh doesn't want the others to know; and his mother knows where he is. And I expect Murtagh means if you could help him regularly, get him some work or something, and make him come back."

"Yes," said Murtagh, opening his eyes suddenly, and looking feverish and excited again; "only quick, quick, or he 'll do it again. He doesn't understand, he doesn't understand, and it 's all my fault. Nessa said it was; didn't she, Winnie?" His voice was loud, and he evidently did not quite know what he was saying.

"Hush, hush, my boy," said his uncle. "It shall be all right; I promise you I will go myself to Mrs. O'Toole to-morrow." Murtagh seemed to hear what his uncle said, for he looked content, and dropped back on the pillow from which he had been attempting to rise; but then he fainted again, and though proper remedies soon revived him the coming of the doctor was anxiously watched for.

He came and examined first the wound in Murtagh's arm. Mr. Plunkett's bullet had passed through the fleshy part of the arm, and though the loss of blood had been considerable the wound was not important. But the exposure and excitement of the last three days had brought more serious effects in their train, and the doctor looked very grave, when, after examining the boy, he began to give careful directions to Nessa.

He would come early next day, he said, and all might be well, but he feared it was his duty to warn them that the case might be a very serious one.

His fears were but too well founded, and not many days later a telegram went from Mr. Blair to his brother Launcelot telling him that Murtagh was dangerously stricken with brain fever.

* * * * *

But he was not to die. November, December, and January passed away, and one mild day early in February he was well enough to sit in the big arm-chair by the open school-room window, while Winnie sat on the window-sill, swinging her legs outside, and fed her ducks once more with a merry heart. It had been a sad winter for her and Rosie and Bobbo, but their independent ways had proved of some use, and they had given real help in the long time of anxious nursing. Mr. Plunkett had taken his turn of sitting up at night, and had shown himself a valuable nurse. And all smaller sorrows had been merged in the one great trouble.

With Murtagh ill the children could think of little else; but Mr. Blair had been roused by the events preceding the boy's illness to act for once with energy. He had kept his promise of going without delay to Mrs. O'Toole, and he had known how to draw from her the information she had refused to Murtagh. Pat had been produced, and Mr. Blair knowing Mr. Plunkett well, had trusted him with the whole story.

Mr. Plunkett justified the trust. Honor would have forbidden any attempt to punish the boy, and Mr Blair saw that in this instance the ends of policy also would be better served by generous treatment; but it was neither policy nor the strict requirements of honor alone which moved Mr. Plunkett to take the tone he did when he talked with Mr. Blair, and to listen with unwonted gentleness even to Nessa when she suggested that one of the best ways of saving Pat from further mischief would be to find work for him elsewhere.

It was not the effect of the danger from which he had escaped; that would probably have made him simply hard and indignant; but Pat's confession had opened his eyes to many things. Unexpected kindness, together with Murtagh's dangerous illness, had filled Pat with remorse. He had confessed not only his full share in this last enterprise, but his unaided burning of Mr. Plunkett's hayricks; and it was in hearing of Murtagh's entire innocence with respect to that misfortune, that Mr. Plunkett's self-confidence received a shock of which the effect was to him considerable. The fact that it was only a child whom he had misjudged and unfairly tried to punish, did not make a difference to him as it would have done to most people. He had been unjust; and whether the injustice had been committed towards a child, a man, or a chimpanzee, had, according to his way of looking at it, nothing to do with the question.

He was accustomed to respect himself, to think himself right, and now he found that he had been wrong,—more wrong than the child he had despised. He may have been proud, but he was not a man to shirk anything. He vividly realized the ruin into which the two boys had nearly rushed, and while he made no attempt even in his own mind to exculpate them altogether he remembered that they were children, and blamed himself unsparingly for the treatment which had roused them to such a pitch of passion.

He would have thought little of Pat had it not been for Murtagh. He had nothing to reproach himself with so far as Pat was concerned. At any other time he would have said the boy had only got what he deserved when he was caned for an impertinence. But the revelation of his injustice to Murtagh had strangely shaken his trust in himself. He had been wrong with him, perhaps he had often been wrong with other people too.

The very fact that no one else thought of attaching a shadow of blame to him, made him perhaps judge himself all the more severely; and it was with almost childlike humility that he thought how nearly he had killed Murtagh at the very moment when the boy, moved by some unaccountable impulse of forgiveness, was fighting in his defence.

Looking back over his feelings he was forced to acknowledge to himself that he had never for a moment felt forgivingly towards Murtagh. The child had been greater than he; he freely and humbly acknowledged it. He did not know that he owed his life to little Marion's love, but he turned to it in his trouble. Whatever he had done to others he had never judged her too harshly, and her clinging arms about his neck comforted him now when, though even Marion scarcely knew it, he was in need of comfort. And perhaps the gentle little spirit upon which at this time he was leaning influenced his actions more than either of them knew, for he certainly could not have been expected to feel particularly tender towards Pat; and yet Nessa was surprised by the kindness with which he entered into their plans for him, and relieved them of the trouble of making arrangements.

He advised Mr. Blair to apprentice the lad to a trade in Dublin, where he would be removed from the influence of his bad companions, and he himself took the trouble to find a respectable household in which the boy might live; so that when the cloud of delirium passed from Murtagh's brain and he asked with almost his first connected words for Pat O'Toole, Nessa was able to tell him truly that Pat was quite safe and was doing well.

But that had been some weeks ago. Mr. Plunkett had been in England on business since then. Murtagh had grown daily stronger; and surrounded by Nessa's tender cares, and by the household rejoicing which attended his recovery, he found his convalescence a pleasant time.

He had spent more than one day in the big arm-chair, looking out with all an invalid's pleasure at the returning life which the spring sunshine was bringing to the land; and as he sat and watched the purple shadows of the trees and hedges contrasting with the faint green of the winter grass, or gazed at the bright sky above where little white clouds disported themselves in the clear blue air, he had many thoughts that he would have found it hard to express to any one. Never had the crocuses seemed so bright or the snow-drops so beautiful as they seemed this year; and when one day the children brought him in a spray of bursting hawthorn and a bunch of lord and lady leaves from the hedges, tears of pleasure came into his eyes at the sight.

Life was very peaceful and beautiful in those early spring days. Nessa's presence seemed to have brought a spring of gentleness to the children's hearts, and the joy in Murtagh's recovery shed sunshine through the house. The boys too were near the realization of one of their chief hopes. They were to go to school. For Mr. Launcelot Blair on hearing from his brother an account of all that happened had written to say that he was coming home on leave, and that one of his first cares should be to find a private tutor to whom Murtagh and Bobbo might go to be prepared for being sent next year to Eton.

"From all that you tell me of them," he wrote, "I believe that the discipline of a public school is what they want. They have been so left to themselves that they judge nothing by an ordinary standard, and a lot of rough school-boys will knock common sense into them a great deal faster than you or I could do it."

To the boys no prospect could be more delightful. They had longed to go to school; and though the preliminary tutor had never entered into their dreams, they acknowledged that it might be as well to be somewhat more advanced in their studies before they exposed their little stock of learning to the world, and they accepted him very cheerily, determining to work hard now they had something to work for.

One thing still remained to be done. To-day Murtagh was to see Mr. Plunkett for the first time since his recovery. He felt some natural nervousness at the prospect of the interview, but convinced of his fault, he had, since he had been able to think about it, looked forward anxiously to making the only reparation in his power, and no false shame came to trouble him when he thought of the explanation and apology he owed to Mr. Plunkett.

And now, while King and Senior squabbled over a tempting piece of brown bread too large for either of them to swallow, and Murtagh lay back in the chair, amused but scarcely taking the trouble to laugh, a big Newfoundland poked his black muzzle between and carried off the morsel.

"Why, Win," exclaimed Murtagh, roused by the sudden apparition to a more energetic display of interest, "where did he come from? Did papa get him for you?"

Winnie did what Murtagh never expected to see her do when anything touched, however remotely, upon Royal, — began to laugh.

"No," she said. "Guess who did."

"I don't know," replied Murtagh.

"No, and you never would guess if you tried till Doomsday, so I may as well tell you. Old Plunkett! And, Murtagh," she added, with a sudden change of manner, "he was really sorry. He told me all about it, how it was because he was so very angry. And I thought about you getting in such rages, and —" Winnie paused as though she were fighting out again the struggle to accept the dog.

"What's his name?" asked Murtagh.

"Jim," replied Winnie. "I thought I ought to call him after him, you know; but I really *couldn't* call him 'James dear.' And besides," she added, dropping her voice, "I didn't want it to be a bit like—" She stopped short and her eyes filled with tears.

At that moment steps were heard advancing along the passage: Winnie dashed the tears out of her eyes, and as she glanced up at Murtagh she saw by the faint flush upon his cheek that he guessed who was coming.

"Are you going to say anything to him about—?" she asked.

Murtagh nodded.

"Then I'll be off," she replied, jumping as she spoke from the window-sill to the flower-border beneath. "Come along; Guck, Guck, Guck," And the harsh sound of her duck-call filled the air as she walked away, the white flock waddling after her.

Murtagh was glad of it. It seemed to cover his nervousness a little as the door opened and Mr. Plunkett entered alone. Poor child!—he was very weak still, and his heart beat fast and his hands trembled as he watched Mr. Plunkett advance across the long room. But it was only for a moment. When Mr. Plunkett took one of the wasted hands in his, and asked him kindly how he was, he recovered himself, and answered: "Oh, much better, thank you; they are all so kind, they make me well."

Then after a little pause, the flush mounting again to his cheek: "I wanted to see you because I wanted to tell you I am very, very sorry I was so near—being so dreadfully wicked." And the effort to speak of it brought tears to his eyes. They were driven back again at once, but Mr. Plunkett saw them. He had not expected any apology; he had been thinking how wasted and shadowy the boy still looked. He was taken by surprise, and he suddenly flushed and looked more confused than Murtagh.

Not that he did not think an apology was owing to him; but Murtagh had scarcely ever spoken even civilly to him before, and the brown eyes raised to his looked so humble and beseeching through their shimmering veil of tears, that he found himself remembering only all the hard things he had said and done to the boy.

"Don't say anything more," he said, looking straight before him out of the window; "perhaps there were faults on both sides."

Murtagh did not quite hear, for Mr. Plunkett did not speak with his usual distinct utterance, but he was encouraged to continue:

"I didn't know how wicked it was. I thought it would be a great thing to do, because I thought—" He hesitated a little, not quite sure how much Mr. Plunkett would bear. "I thought you were oppressing the people, and it would set them free. And then Nessa said you weren't, and then little Marion— It was so dreadful; I knew about how wicked it was then, but I never, never would have tried if I'd known at first."

"Marion!" said Mr. Plunkett, turning his head. "What had she to do with it?"

"I was in the ditch near your garden, and you were carrying her, and she had her arms round you, and she seemed to love you so. It seemed almost like papa," said Murtagh, his voice dropping at the recollection. "It would have been so dreadful if anything happened to you then. And then you said, 'God knew you were doing the best you could for the people;' and I felt quite sure you were speaking the truth, and you really were trying, and you were only just making mistakes; and it seems so cruel people getting hurt for making mistakes."

Mr. Plunkett did not speak at once. He knew himself to be one of the best agents in Ireland, and yet he had listened without a smile as Murtagh, in childish good faith, described how he had been tried, found wanting, and forgiven by so ignorant a little judge. Perhaps the boy's words stirred something within him that was not often moved. Perhaps with the remembrance of the death to which both he and the child had been so near there came a thought of another tribunal at which he would one day be tried, found wanting, and yet, he hoped, forgiven; for after a moment he turned and said:

"I have made mistakes with you; but we must start fresh, and perhaps we shall get on better now."

And before Murtagh had recovered from his surprise Mr. Plunkett had wrung his hand and left the room. For a moment or two Murtagh was too much astonished to understand. Then he felt that he was forgiven, really forgiven, as he had never expected to be. The old life was wiped out, and with a rush of happy exultation he realized that this was indeed a fresh start.

Nessa entered the room with a bunch of white crocuses and some ivy leaves that she had just brought in from the garden.

"Oh, Nessa," he exclaimed, "I am so happy!"

"Are you, dear?" she said, with a glad smile, kneeling down beside him and laying the crocuses on his knees.

"Yes," he said. "Everything seems so good and bright. Only when I look at it all," he added slowly, "I wonder how I could ever—have thought like I used to think."

Nessa did not answer. She wondered too as she gazed out across the sunny grass to the bridge. Winnie was standing on the ivy-covered parapet, with one hand swinging her hat, and with the other supporting a pigeon which she was feeding with bits of bread from between her lips; Jim sat patient on the gravel; the white ducks clamored round her; and another pigeon was spreading his tail and pluming himself upon the parapet at her feet. The water sparkled; the sky beyond was blue; the voices of the other children playing somewhere out of sight floated in happy bursts upon the air. It was all beautiful enough to make anybody wonder how wickedness could be.

Murtagh's eyes followed Nessa's. They both looked at Winnie in silence for a moment, and then he continued, turning to Nessa:

"But I am glad I have been ill. It has made me seem to understand things better. I have been thinking and thinking, often when you didn't think I was thinking of anything. And I seem to feel now,"—he blushed a little, but went on firmly,—"that even if people are wicked and disagreeable it can't do one bit of good hating them. I mean," he said, fixing his eyes with a fervent earnest look upon hers, "I feel it is so that I don't think I ever can forget it."

"Yes," said Nessa softly. "If God were to hate us even when we are wicked what should we do? It often comes over me with a sort of rush of gladness, how that when we make mistakes, and get tired, and go wrong, He is still there watching over us, loving us all the time, never getting impatient. And you know," she added a little shyly, "we are told to try and be as like God as we can."

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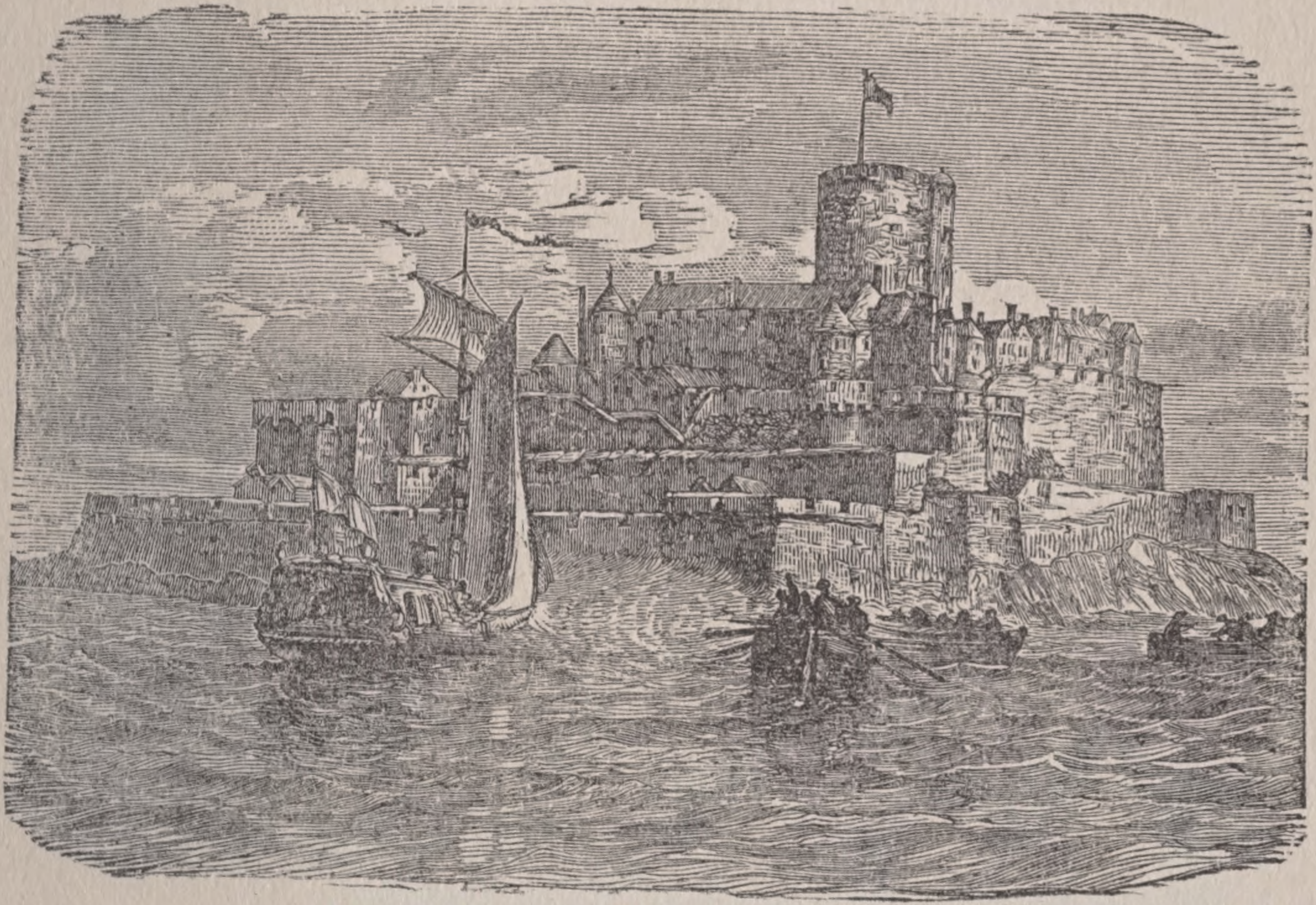

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